



"The White man's 1984"  
—H. A. Covington

*Ward Kendall*  
***Hold Back  
This Day***

# Contents

[One](#)  
[Two](#)  
[Three](#)  
[Four](#)  
[Five](#)  
[Six](#)  
[Seven](#)  
[Eight](#)  
[Nine](#)  
[Ten](#)  
[Eleven](#)  
[Twelve](#)  
[Thirteen](#)  
[Fourteen](#)  
[Fifteen](#)  
[Sixteen](#)  
[Seventeen](#)  
[Eighteen](#)  
[Nineteen](#)  
[Twenty](#)  
[About the Author](#)

# **Hold Back This Day**

*by*

**Ward Kendall**

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*The Triumph of Death*, 1562

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*"If our buildings, our highways, our railroads should be wrecked, we could rebuild them. If our cities should be destroyed, out of the very ruins we could erect newer and greater ones. Even if our armed might should be crushed, we could rear sons who would redeem our power. But if the blood of our white race should become corrupted and mingled with the blood of Africa, then the present greatness of the United States of America would be destroyed and all hope for the future would be forever gone."*

*— United States Senator Theodore G. Bilbo, 1947*

*"There are truths which are not for all men, nor for all times."*

*— Voltaire*



# One

*"Who controls the past controls the future.  
Who controls the present controls the past."*

— George Orwell

Somewhere in the drowsy backwaters of his mind Jeff Huxton heard ten billion children singing:

*"Come little children, come sing your sweet graces,  
come dance in the sunlight, come lift up your faces,  
We'll skip towards Jerusalem, then onward to Mecca,  
we'll quote from the Bible, then chant from the Veda,  
So, sing little ones of Christ and of Allah,  
united forever with Marx and Mandela,  
For this is the way, the way of the world,  
all joined together, oh come boys and girls . . ."*

Jeff awoke with a sudden start, a thin, hot sweat trickling down his throat. Harsh African sunlight burned deep into his pale blue eyes as he squinted uncertainly towards the horizon. For a long, disoriented moment he remained still, immobile, confused as to where he was.

*"We're here."*

At the sound of the familiar voice Jeff opened his eyes fully, his bearings restored. Turning towards his wife Li Ming, he murmured, "So we are." Then he looked again at the blazing countryside sliding past the monorail's curved span of window, rubbing sleep and dried sweat from his travel-weary eyes. Reflexively, he started to yawn, then quickly suppressed the urge. It would not do for a newly appointed skoolplex administrator to act too human, now that he was nearing his final destination.

Seconds later, the monorail began to hum at a lower pitch as it started to slow. Jeff sat up straighter in his seat and glanced again at the passing vista, scorched and rocky beneath a burning xanthic sky. Here and there, clots of palm trees dotted the landscape, and though cool and green in the hot morning light, they gave no sense of relief from the



otherwise barren desolation. Further away, in the heat-rippled distance, buff-colored hills arose, shimmering and half-real, at the edge of which a cluster of pastel-hued structures appeared.

“. . . New Theravada,” a pretty voice chimed down the length of the crowded compartment.

Looking forward, Jeff saw a sign whip past, mounted on a transparent blue pillar fifteen meters high. He had only a moment to read its message—

Welcome To New Theravada  
South Africa Sector 37  
Africa Zone 12

—before it vanished in the distance behind him.

Further along, a procession of banner-festooned poles appeared, flanking the elevated monorail track along both sides, like festive celebrants. Jeff’s eyes shimmered with reflected color as the monorail whipped past them. One flag among dozens, blown outward in the passing wake, flashed out a World Gov proclamation:

Justice  
Equality  
Service  
Unity  
Salvation

Speeding past, yet another banner unfurled:

Allegiance  
Liberty  
Labor  
Atonement  
Humility

Jeff felt the touch of his wife’s hand on his wrist and turned away from the streaking banners.

“Are you feeling alright, Jeff?”

He smiled. “Just new job jitters, I suppose.”

“Well, it is a big promotion for you dear—skoolplex administrator.”

He squeezed her hand in his, "For us, Li Ming."

She smiled back. "And for the children."

"Speaking of which . . ." Jeff turned around and looked over his shoulder, searching the aisle for any glimpse of his son and daughter. As he did a thick strand of tawny hair fell across his forehead. "No sign of the little monsters," he commented, scanning the dark faces rowed behind him. Not one even remotely resembled his own, he realized. Not one stared back at him with eyes other than dark, or had skin other than brown. It was not so strange when one remembered that this was a monorail passing through the dark heart of Africa—until one realized that this journey had originated in Europe, and that these passengers on holiday were mostly native-born residents of that region.

For a moment Jeff felt an old uneasiness stir within him, as if every dark eye behind him were fixed against his own blue ones in one remorseless, implacable scrutiny.

"Dad!" shouted Adam Huxton, his son, suddenly running down the long aisle towards him.

"We're in New Theravada!" chimed Puja, his daughter, following up close behind.

The two Huxton children rushed into his arms, all giggles and mischief. Adam, his son from a previous marriage, was nine. Puja, the result of his present marriage, was six. Whereas Adam bore a strong resemblance to his deceased mother, with his flaxen hair, fair complexion, and eyes the color of afternoon sky, his daughter Puja mirrored her mother's Afro-Asian features of dark, almond-shaped eyes and yellowish-brown skin.

"Daddy! We walked up and down the whole monorail!" bubbled Puja. "Three times!"

"And we counted every compartment along the way!" Adam proudly exclaimed. "Didn't we, Puja!"

"Almost two hundred, daddy."

"One hundred and ninety-six," Adam amended, with the arrogant precision of an older child correcting a younger sibling.

"And looky, daddy!" Puja said, thrusting out her thin little arm. "While you were asleep our bracelets changed color!"

Jeff looked down at the glowing band of syntho-metal locked around his daughter's wrist, then at his own identification bracelet. Smiling, he glanced backed at Puja with a fatherly twinkle in his eyes. "You're right, pumpkin. They've changed color, alright. From blue to yellow." A note of mystery crept into his voice. "Why do you suppose . . . ?"

"Cause we're in Africa now," Adam pontificated, not falling for his father's dumb

act. He hadn't been fooled by that kind of thing since turning eight. Well, not since turning eight and a half.

"I liked my bracelet better when it was the color of your eyes," Puja pouted, even as she admired the metallic gold sheen of the device secured with World Gov implacability around her wrist.

"Well, blue's just for Europe Zone," Jeff reminded. "From now on, it'll be yellow no matter where we go in Africa."

"But daddy, it's always been blue," she stubbornly protested, though not too seriously.

"Not always, sweetcake. Once, your bracelet glowed red as a cherry."

Puja's dark eyes grew wide with wonder. "Red?" she echoed, her mouth now a perfect "o" of childhood astonishment.

"That's right, little one. Back when we lived in Asia Sector 82."

"I don't remember, daddy."

"Well, you were only a baby. And by the time you were two, we'd moved on to Europe Sector."

"I remember living in Asia!" Adam interrupted. "It was full of giant snakes!"

Jeff chuckled at his son. "If you say so, Adam."

"Will my bracelet ever glow green, daddy?" Puja asked, puzzling now over the identification device pulsing yellow on her wrist.

Again Jeff laughed. "Praise to Allah and Vishnu, but I sincerely hope not, Puja. At least, not anytime too soon. I'm not ready just yet for a transfer to South America." He glanced in his wife's direction. "Nor, I think, is your mother."

"I'm hungry, daddy," his daughter suddenly blurted, in the way children do when they instantly divert their attention to other matters.

"Well, pumpkin, let's just see what we can do about that—" Jeff said, reaching into the slit pocket of his tropic-wear garment. He plucked out a small vial and uncapped it, shaking out two triangular orange tablets of Nomo-Hunga.

"Me first!" Adam exclaimed, snatching at his father's outstretched hand. He gobbled down the tablet of Nomo-Hunga with a triumphant grin aimed towards his slower-reacting sister. Puja smirked back at her brother, then grabbed her own tablet, munching it voraciously between two rows of dainty white teeth.

"Yum, yum," she said, giggling.

Jeff offered the vial towards his wife. "Li Ming?"

"Not now, Jeff. The monorail is about to come to a stop."

Jeff looked out the window. Buildings, trees, and throngs of people slowed to a standstill. "Well, everybody—" Jeff sighed, putting away the vial of Nomo-Hunga, "looks like we've finally arrived at our new home." He glanced expectantly towards his wife.

"Thank God and Buddha," she said. "I detested Germany Sector anyway. Those people in Guadalajarastadt were just too Mexicanized for my taste."

Jeff winced at the racial slur, then shot a worried glance over his shoulder to see if anyone else had overheard. Satisfied no one had, he turned back to his wife and whispered, "You really must be more careful, Li Ming! Are you trying to get yourself sent off to a sensitivity re-education camp?"

"Oh, Christ and Shiva, Jeff! If I ever have to see another bratwurst taco or smell another Wienerschnitzel smothered in guacamole sauce I'll kill myself." With that, Li Ming snatched her carry-on garmpak from the rack overhead and got to her feet, making her way down the aisle. Jeff grabbed his as well, along with the children's. Together the four of them moved down the passenger-jammed monorail, Adam and Puja squirming with excitement.

Somewhere behind them, lost among the milling passengers, Jeff thought he heard a lone child singing sweetly, innocently, under her breath: ". . . we'll skip towards Jerusalem, then onward to Mecca . . ."

"Welcome to New Theravada, Jeff," Counselor Ahmad Yehudit greeted with a hearty handshake as the long line of new arrivals cleared the third and final security checkpoint. "I trust you and your family had a pleasant trip from Germany Sector 182."

"Very pleasant," Jeff replied, one arm of his wrapped tightly around his wife's slender waist. "And very nice of you to come and meet us. We weren't expecting anyone, after all."

"Think nothing of it, Jeff," Yehudit dismissed in a deep, mellow voice as he led them through the crowded concourse. "I always make it a point to personally greet all new skoolplex employees to our fair community."

"Most kind of you."

Yehudit was a big man, Jeff noticed. Even so, he had a gentle, lumbering way of walking, as if he were a bull elephant moving slowly through a herd of gazelles gathered around a watering hole. And, like gazelles, people parted as he approached, lest they get trampled by his massive hulk.

As they moved towards the exit ramp of the monorail station, Yehudit took notice of Jeff's two small children skipping along at his side. "And what have we here?" Yehudit said, looking down from his great height.

"I'm Adam!" Jeff's rambunctious son loudly proclaimed.

"And I'm Puja," his daughter added shyly.

"What two wonderful little citizens you and your wife have, Jeff," Yehudit commented, reaching a thick leathery hand down to the boy and patting him on the head. Yehudit next turned his attention to Puja. "Do you think you'll like it here in New Theravada, Puja?"

"Do they have wild animals?"

"Why, of course we have them. You and your brother may visit them anytime you wish in the wildlife preserves nearby." Yehudit lifted his eyes again and smiled at Li Ming Huxton. "Wonderful little citizens . . . As for you Li Ming, I think you'll enjoy your new life here. We have all the social amenities you've been accustomed to while living in Germany Sector 182—excellent shopping, civic organizations, and much more. I'm sure you'll be pleasantly surprised."

"I'm looking forward to it, Counselor Yehudit," Li Ming said.

"Feel free to call me Ahmad," Yehudit replied with a slowly expanding smile, as if it too, like his massive body, took time to get into motion.

Finally, Yehudit turned his attention back to Jeff, his carefully controlled glance straining not to expose any hint of distaste. After all, this was a prejudice-free society, and all citizens were treated with the same state-mandated equality. Nevertheless, he could not help feeling a nettlesome jab of repugnance as he noted the new skoolplex administrator's light-brown hair, his fair complexion, his straight, somewhat blunt-tipped nose, his archaic, Anglo-Saxon jawline—all features now extremely rare and considered rather gauche in today's racially homogenized world.

And the eyes.

Blue.

Disturbingly blue, Ahmad Yehudit concluded.

He wondered why Jeff Huxton hadn't had them surgically altered. My Buddha, he thought, what a career impediment, even in these prejudice-free times. Perhaps later, after he got to know the man better, he might tactfully suggest to him having dark brown perma-contacts implanted.

The five of them maneuvered onward through the milling crowds and were almost

to the exit when a somber gong began to sound. Yehudit came to a ponderous halt and knelt down in the direction of Mecca, as hundreds of others all over the sprawling concourse were now doing.

Jeff glanced at his wife, then down at his two children.

“Aww, dad—” Adam started to protest.

“You know the law, Adam.”

Puja knelt beside Counselor Yehudit, her little face beaming. “Looky, daddy!”

“Good girl.”

“Do I hafta, dad—?” Adam whined.

A stern look from his father settled the matter.

“Shiva—” Li Ming cursed under her breath. She was wearing her new black and tan outfit and she did not want to soil it on the dusty floor of the monorail station. Still, the law was the law. Shaking back a shock of thick black hair with imperious disdain, she too knelt down and faced towards Mecca, even though her thoughts were already drifting away to some imagined shopping bazaar on the crowd-thronged streets of New Theravada.

Jeff knelt beside his wife and children as well, turning obediently in the direction of Mecca. Raising his right hand he solemnly made the sign of the cross, as hundreds of others were now doing, and began to chant. For this was the way of the world, he thought, this singular monolithic voice tick-tocking out the bland and soulless metronome of one united humanity:

“O, bless us, almighty Jesus, Allah, Vishnu, and Buddha. Give us this day our daily bread and lead us not unto temptation, but ever upward towards eternal racial harmony. For the way of all flesh is through one common blood, one common people, and one common Race, forever unto forever unto forever . . .”



# Two

*"The more laws the less justice."*

— *Marcus Tullius Cicero*

"Wow, dad! My own room!"

Jeff grinned. "I told you Africa wouldn't be such a bad place."

"No Shiva!"

Jeff frowned disapprovingly at his son's expletive.

"Mom always says it," Adam meekly defended, seeing the look in his father's eyes.

"Never mind about your moth—" Jeff started to say when Counselor Yehudit, Li Ming, and Puja returned from down the hallway of their new government bungalow.

"Well, Jeff—?" Yehudit intoned with a benevolent smile.

"It's quite a step up for us," Jeff admitted, looking around again, quite honestly pleased by it all.

"Rank does have its privileges," Yehudit reminded genially. "You'll find many other changes as well now that you're a GS 15."

"And we get our own bathroom, Jeff!" Li Ming exclaimed, coming up and hugging him. "Our very own bathroom! No more communal showers!"

"And daddy, daddy!" little Puja shouted excitedly, jumping up and down, "I only have to report to a child behaviorist once a week 'stead of twice like before!"

"Don't let that new privilege go to your head, pumpkin," Jeff admonished, "nor you either, Adam."

They walked again through the bungalow, the children darting helter-skelter about them.

"If you think you're up to it, Jeff, I'd like to walk you through the skoolplex . . . perhaps introduce you to a few of your new colleagues along the way."

Jeff glanced at his wife.

"Oh, go right ahead, Jeff. The kids and I have tons of unpacking to do and then I'm going to treat myself to at least a three hour soak in that glorious new tub of ours."



“Can you handle these two demons all by yourself?”

Li Ming grinned as she grabbed each rambunctious child by an ear. “Run along with Counselor Yehudit, dear. I’ll handle these two, believe you me.”

“Mom!”

“Let go!”

Jeff chuckled. “Good luck.”

He departed the bungalow with Yehudit.

The grounds of Skoolplex 619 were pleasantly landscaped, shaded by huge, spreading jacaranda trees alive with bird chatter. Jeff walked with a slow, easy gait as he took in his new surroundings and all that Counselor Yehudit had to say.

“Like all skoolplexes worldwide,” Ahmad explained, “we administer to all grade levels here, kindergarten through 12th grade. We also offer a few pre-university courses for those students who qualify.”

Jeff nodded respectfully, though he already knew all of these details, having taught for many years in various skoolplexes around the world.

“However,” Yehudit went on, “Skoolplex 619 is also special in that it was recently designated by World Gov to take part in the final phase of the Harmony Project, as you may be aware.”

Jeff again nodded, having been fully apprised of the special functions of Skoolplex 619 while still employed in Germany Sector 182.

They turned down a stretch of walkway lined with palm trees and headed towards a cluster of low, dome-like structures bordering the edge of a veldt-fringed hoverkraft port.

“Over there is where we house our Harmony Project candidates,” Counselor Yehudit directed as he led his new skoolplex administrator towards the nearest dome, around which a number of young black males and females clustered, talking and laughing among themselves.” These are our latest arrivals from Borneo Sector 85 and New Guinea Sector 13. Very dark complexioned, as you can see. Skintone Class 9s and 10s for the most part. Definitely not the norm World Gov is seeking to achieve for the population at large.” As he spoke, Yehudit tried not to glance at Jeff himself, all too consciously aware of the skoolplex administrator’s own Skintone Class 1 rating at the other end of the racial spectrum. “And mixed in among them,” Yehudit went on, directing Jeff’s eyes here and there among the group of black youths, “we have the last unblended arrivals from Europe Zone 5—in particular from Iceland Sector 15.”

Jeff observed studiously, noting how the black students from Borneo and New Guinea were being purposefully intermingled with the various blondes, brunettes, and redheads of European heritage by several cheerfully smiling mixed-race Unification counselors.

“As demonstrated here, these Europe Zone candidates are entirely Skintone Class 1s and 2s. Like their darker counterparts, they too are far removed from the government ideal that World Gov is very near to achieving . . .”

“Which is a world of Skintone Class 5s,” Jeff amplified, unconsciously parroting the government party line.

“Precisely.”

As they strolled on, Jeff silently praised Allah that soon there would be no more people born looking like him or those from Europe Zone 5.

“Up ahead,” Counselor Yehudit indicated, “are the end results of the Harmony Project.”

The two men turned towards a larger dome structure and disappeared through its entrance. After having their identification bracelets scanned and approved by World Gov, both men entered a large circular room. Filled with dozens of squalling, interracial babies, the Harmony Chamber was World Gov’s final vision made real.

“We average between fifteen and twenty multi-racial births per week—hundreds per skoolplex term. Furthermore, with the Harmony Project underway at some twenty-five thousand other skoolplexes worldwide, you can easily see just how committed World Gov is towards ridding humanity of—” Yehudit paused and glanced away from Jeff’s prominent blue eyes, “—the last traces of our troublesome racial differences.”

Jeff nodded soberly, painfully aware of his own physical appearance. Light skin and blue eyes wouldn’t have been so noticeable in almost any other profession, he realized, but here at the cutting edge of racial homogenization he certainly felt uncomfortable at times. Still, he loved his work, loved being committed to the worthwhile goal of ridding humanity of its long-standing racial hatred.

Glancing again at Counselor Yehudit, Jeff suddenly envied his multi-racial appearance. Here was a thoroughly “browned” specimen of human being, he thought, with skin that was neither light nor dark, hair neither straight nor kinky, eyes neither slanted nor round, head neither Nordic nor Nubian. For Ahmad Yehudit was completely devoid of clearly defined features or colors. He could have been born anywhere or everywhere. Or nowhere. There simply was no way of knowing his dominant ethnic origins, or from what region of Earth he had originally come from.

Then again, if one really chose to examine Ahmad Yehudit centimeter by centimeter, one could just make out the faintest trace of Semitic ancestry in the slightly curved bridge of his nose, vestiges of American Indian blood in his high, Mongoloid cheekbones, remnants of Negroid admixture in his thickened lower lip, even a hint of Polynesian endomorphism in the slightly bulbous shape of his massive physique. And, buried beneath all of that, one fleeting wisp of Nordic blood, exposed in a few lighter strands of otherwise black, coily hair.

Yehudit was a “natural,” Jeff realized, the end genetic result of parents, grandparents, and great grandparents who themselves had been racially mixed and remixed until all traces of their original racial ancestry had been dissolved into one great vat of racial homogeneity. Thus, like a child gifted with high intelligence, Yehudit was “gifted” with an utterly bland racial appearance. Being of no particular race, culture, nation, or ethnicity, he was the 22nd century’s Everyman.

The Ideal, Jeff thought.

Everything the Unification had fought to achieve.

Had achieved . . .

“Something on your mind, Jeff? You seemed rather distant for a moment.”

Jeff nodded apologetically, looking away from Yehudit’s nondescript face towards the horizon. “I’m just thankful that we settled for this kind of world instead of global segregation from one another. Otherwise—”

“Otherwise?”

“Otherwise humanity might not have . . . survived.”

“Praise Allah we finally overcame our differences,” Yehudit added somberly, still eyeing Jeff curiously.

“And Vishnu and Buddha,” a passing nurse chimed in, making the sign of the cross as she uttered a few words of Hebrew scripture before departing once more upon her rounds.

Ahmad and Jeff left the Harmony Dome a few minutes later and continued their tour of Skoolplex 619.

“Shortly before you arrived,” Ahmad went on, “I took a few minutes to read over your government file. Quite a career you’ve had, judging by your many foreign posts. As I recall, you graduated from Universityplex 934 in Australia Zone 5.”

“That’s correct, Counselor Yehudit.”

Large, tusk-like teeth exposed themselves in a smile. “Please Jeff . . . call me

Ahmad. No need for formality between us, after all."

Jeff nodded compliantly as they walked on.

"Let's see . . . from there you went on to your first skoolplex assignment in Melbourne . . . or is it Mandelabourne now? I'm never very good at remembering place names."

"Mandelabourne," Jeff answered. "World Gov changed it several years ago."

"Joy to Buddha for that," Ahmad remarked, looking down at a row of tropical flowers lining the walk as they strolled along. Gathering his thoughts again as he paused to examine one particular blossom, he murmured: "And from there . . . ?"

"I was transferred to North America Zone 19."

"Ah, yes, now I recall. To Ciudad Detroit, wasn't it?"

"That's right. I taught there for the next few years."

"And it was there that your son was born?"

"Yes," Jeff replied. "At the time, Adam's mother was teaching at the same skoolplex where I worked. It was during that period that we met and married."

They moved on down the walk.

"As I understand it," Ahmad went on delicately, "your first wife perished during some unfortunate incident in that city."

Jeff barely nodded, remembering again the brutal race riot that had swept through Ciudad Detroit seven years earlier. It had begun as a peaceful demonstration of Skintone 1s and 2s marching on the City Commissioner's Office—a demonstration protesting unfair racial discrimination against light-skinned citizens in housing and employment. Confronting the protestors head on, local World Gov officials proudly proclaimed that racial discrimination was "no longer possible in a racially homogenized, socially enlightened world society."

Reality quickly set in, however, as gangs of medium-brown Skintone 4s, 5s, and 6s converged on the demonstrators, killing dozens before being dispersed. His wife, a Skintone 1 like himself and a long-standing advocate for racial equality, had been one of the casualties. Thus, at the tender age of two, Adam was left motherless.

"Yes, an unfortunate incident," Jeff echoed, fighting to keep any trace of emotion out of his voice. His first wife's cause may have been just, he believed, but it had not been wise of her to defy the society in which they had been born. For that reason, he had chosen not to march with her that fateful day, sadly knowing it would all come to naught. Even now, he struggled with his conscience not to get politically involved over any

matter, no matter how deeply he felt about it.

Seeming to read his thoughts, Ahmad Yehudit said, "And what about you, Jeff? Were you involved in that unfortunate incident?"

So that was it, Jeff thought. This whole conversation had been leading around to the Ciudad Detroit Riot all along. And now it was clear why. Counselor Yehudit must suspect him of involvement in the riot as well, knowing as he would his first wife's participation in it.

"I had no part in it," Jeff carefully answered, as if he were walking across a tightrope. "As for my first wife . . . she was somewhat troubled, I regret to say."

Ahmad nodded his huge brown head in thoughtful consideration, as if he were weighing Jeff's every word upon some inner scale of truth. Then he glanced ahead again, the matter apparently dismissed, and said more brightly, "You are to be commended for getting on with your life after such a tragedy, Jeff. And for finding such a wonderful new wife in Li Ming to help raise your son."

"Thank you for saying so, Ahmad. Li Ming has been very supportive since our marriage."

"Blessings to Allah for that," Ahmad murmured.

A moment later they arrived at a third grade classroom.

Gesturing towards the doorway, Ahmad Yehudit led Jeff Huxton inside for a peek. For the next several minutes they stood in silent observation as the instructor, a woman of typical multi-racial ancestry, delivered a lecture on the nature of sexual orientation to her rapt pupils:

"—and some of you, as you mature, will eventually find yourselves more attracted to members of your own gender rather than to the opposite one. Always remember, there is no shame in that. For World Gov ensures each and every one of us a proper place in society—"

A moment later, Yehudit nodded at Jeff and they quietly withdrew, walking next door to an adjacent classroom. There, another group of third graders stood in line, filing obediently towards a smiling technician grasping a small device in his hand, which he waved across each child as he passed. A nearby monitor recorded each pupil's name, grade, and vital statistics—along with one other element of crucial data.

"Times have changed since you taught at the elementary level, Jeff. The instructor here is using a—"

"Sexual orientation scanner," Jeff politely cut in. "I'm familiar with the device, even though this is the first time I've actually seen one in use."

Ahmad nodded his elephantine head. "Quite correct, Jeff. It's good to see that you've kept up with World Gov's latest educational methods. As you must be aware then, the government is gravely concerned for the emotional well-being of all its young citizens. Even—if not more so—at this tender age. So, rather than waiting for a child to endure all the agonizing uncertainty regarding his sexual orientation as he enters puberty, the state makes every effort now to pinpoint a child's future sexual orientation at a young age. Then, after determining those children destined to be homosexuals, we carefully steer them towards calm acceptance and understanding. Come—allow me to show you precisely what I mean."

Counselor Yehudit led Jeff to the next classroom. Stepping past a translucent sliding door as it softly hummed aside, they entered a darkened room where a small group of boys sat, watching a large wall monitor. On it the image of a man, lithe and handsome in appearance, sat on the edge of a river bank. The sound of his voice—warm, soothing and friendly—was obviously quite appealing to the gathering of boys, Jeff noted. There was nothing unusual about the man except that he was stark naked.

"I love boys—always have. Just like each one of you watching this presentation is going to love other boys—and men—one day. It'll happen sooner than you think, once you start attending gym classes and taking showers together . . ."

Jeff carefully glanced away, realizing as he did that his distaste might be seen as a hate crime by any watching authority. Fortunately, no one had observed him, and a moment later he and Counselor Yehudit were thankfully out the door.

Once outside the classroom again, Yehudit commented, "As you just witnessed for yourself Jeff, World Gov not only sanctions homosexuality but openly encourages and nurtures pedophilia. It really must, you know. With a world population of nineteen billion people and factions of Chrislamhinbuddhism still opposed to mandatory birth control, any alternate way to lessen the birth rate is welcomed."

Yehudit and Jeff glanced in briefly at a group of girls in the next classroom, those targeted by the state as future lesbians. They watched the instructional presentation for a few minutes, that of a masculine-looking female with a brutish face performing various acts of cunnilingus on a pretty young girl of eight or nine. Thinking of his own daughter Puja as he observed, Jeff found himself quietly relieved that her sexuality screening the year before had determined her to be heterosexual, just like her brother. Yet, he knew World Gov would not have approved of his way of thinking had they been aware of it, since parents were admonished to accept their homosexual children as not only desirable, but actually preferable to heterosexual ones.

As the two men stepped into hot African sunshine again, Yehudit went on: "And so,

as this skoolplex's new administrator, you'll be in the vanguard of bringing forth legions of racially-blended, sexually adjusted, and spiritually uplifted citizens. Our future, Jeff, praise the four gods."

They continued with their tour, with Ahmad stopping from time to time along the way to introduce Jeff to various members of the skoolplex staff. Around noon they paused beneath the spreading branches of a mpingo tree and sat down on a bench, each man momentarily lost in thought as he nibbled on a tablet of Nomo-Hunga.

Finally, Counselor Yehudit spoke: "As you may have heard while living in Europe, much of this part of Africa has suffered from recent and severe famine. Not New Theravada in particular, praise Jesus, but much of the surrounding region. For that reason, I have asked all skoolplex administrators within my regional jurisdiction to voluntarily sacrifice one meal per week. Doing so will help conserve World Gov food rations until the famine is past. And now that you're here, Jeff, I trust you'll continue to uphold that voluntary sacrifice, as it serves to inspire our entire staff and student body to do the same."

Savoring the last flavored remnants of his Nomo-Hunga on the tip of his tongue, Jeff nodded absently that he would. Then, though he should have thought better of it, he asked Yehudit just how effective the voluntary sacrifice had been among the staff and students of Skoolplex 619.

"A selfish few—as always—prefer a full stomach to a full spirit," Yehudit answered, as he pondered a swarm of black ants fretting about the carcass of a dead grasshopper lying in the dirt at his feet. "However, should famine ever sweep into New Theravada itself, those that failed to sacrifice," he quietly lowered a foot and crushed one particular ant trying to flee from his fellows with a dismembered morsel of leg, "will be remembered."

Jeff said no more, sensing, with a sudden, dangerous intensity, that Ahmad Yehudit was not a man to be crossed.





# Three

*“When you gaze long into the abyss,  
the abyss also gazes into you.”*

— *Friedrich Nietzsche*

The following evening the entire staff of Skoolplex 619 threw a get-acquainted dinner for Jeff Huxton and his family, officially welcoming them to New Theravada.

Counselor Ahmad Yehudit himself introduced Skoolplex 619’s newly appointed administrator during a speech inside the auditorium, where the dinner of soybean steaks and lentils was held:

“Jeff comes to us eminently qualified for his new duties as Skoolplex 619’s new administrator. With his many years of educational experience, serving in no less than four world zones, a record of caring, compassionate service, and a proven commitment to worldwide racial blending, I feel assured that he will continue to insure that a vital link of dedication remains unbroken here at Skoolplex 619, now that Julio Torgensen, our former administrator, has moved on to his new post in Japan Sector 2. So, let us all open our hearts this evening and give Jeff and his fine and loving family a generous South African welcome.”

Amid the applause and salutations to Yehudit’s lofty words drinks were hoisted in glorious toast, with noble affirmations made by one and all. Then, as the auditorium settled once again, Counselor Yehudit summoned Skoolplex 619’s new administrator to the podium.

After an encouraging prod from his wife, Jeff Huxton came up and diffidently shook Yehudit’s enormous hand, then turned towards the gathered skoolplex staff below. For a long, self-conscious moment he stood there before them, stiff with anxiety. Once again, he was all too aware of his racial appearance, and how much it differed from the vast majority of those whose dark eyes were now fixed upon him. How would it be to look like them—just for once—he wondered. To be part of that racially-blended brotherhood below, all dark-haired and brown-skinned and knowing—knowing with a certainty beyond question that you were safe there amongst your monotone brethren. Safe from

racial slights and sidelong glances that each new day you feared might come your way. Safe from the never-ending sense of vulnerability that made you so godforsakenly isolated from the rest of humanity.

Yes . . . Jeff thought.

But, what of it?

His personal discomfort was of no importance, at least not in the greater scheme of things. That he endured this private little hell each and every day was the price every racially-unblended individual like him had to pay, in order that humanity might live in racial harmony.

Yet, he could not help but feel nakedly exposed before the collective power of their stares. For they were the world, the damnable dark eyes of a world where men like him were almost wanton freaks, to be erased, if not in their own time—then through the genes of their children—until the very face of Humanity became the non-face of Ahmad Yehudit.

Jeff hated these private little demons of his, for they profoundly betrayed his openly professed belief that mankind was better off racially homogenized. Forget your doubts, he silently told himself. They're nothing but old prejudices raising their long-buried heads—better left for dead.

Under emotional control again, Jeff cleared his throat, somewhat self-consciously, and began to speak: "Thank you for so many undeserved accolades, Counselor Yehudit. It is true that I am a teacher of long standing, and have served in many places around the world. Teaching has given me deep and lasting satisfaction, and remains my proudest accomplishment. And now, as Skoolplex 619's new chief administrator, let me say that I look forward to working closely with each and every one of you in the days and years ahead . . ."

Jeff lowered his blue eyes for an instant, summoning his next words: "Beyond that, let me also add one other thing: Africa remains the proud seed, along with Asia, by which we will erase our racial differences forever. We have gone far towards that goal already, judging by most of you. Tonight, I stand here gazing down upon faces that are neither African nor Asian nor European, that are neither black nor yellow nor white. Instead, we are now almost uniformly brown, as destiny wisely said we should be. In testimony to that, I would now like to ask that my daughter Puja, along with my wife Li Ming, to stand up as physical proof that they—and not men like me—are the true inheritors of this Earth . . ."

Amid a thunderous round of applause, Li Ming and Puja Huxton stood up.

Cries of Praise Jesus! Power to Allah! Wisdom of Buddha! and Blessings to Vishnu!

swept through the auditorium.

Jeff allowed himself to bask in the applause for a few precious seconds, feeling, if only for the moment, that he were one with them. Then, before the moment could completely fade, he exited the stage, shaking Counselor Yehudit's large, meaty hand again as he passed his table on the way back to his own.

"Gee, dad, how could you?" Adam whined, humiliated over having public attention drawn their way.

Jeff sat down next to his wife. "Why not, Adam?" he responded amiably. "Your sister is the future that the Unification fought to achieve and I was proud to say that."

Adam glanced at his sister's markedly Afro-Asian features, the very ones he knew he lacked. "But I look like you dad. So I guess we're not?"

"Not what, Adam?"

"The future."

Jeff's blue eyes shifted to the brown faces surrounding him, the clatter of their dinnerware and the tinkling of ice inside their glasses of synthetic champagne all but masking his sigh. "You're still young, Adam, so it's hard to understand. But the future of people who looked like you and I ended long ago. In North America, Europe, and Australia. All over the world, in fact."

"Why did it end, dad?" Adam asked, diddling with his fork and trying to look as grown up and interested as he could even though he was bored stiff. He wished he had more to eat, or at least a tablet of Nomo-Hunga to take the edge off his still hungry little stomach.

"If you would try paying attention in history class for once then maybe—"

"Maybe what, dad?"

Jeff didn't answer. Somewhere down a long gray tunnel in his mind he opened a door and remembered again that much of history had been "revised" by World Gov. Eighty-five years ago worldwide racial harmony had come—but not as bloodlessly as World Gov proclaimed. Jeff himself might never have known the truth, had he not encountered old man Parker fifteen years earlier while growing up in Melbourne, Australia.

Parker had been ninety-four back then, and dying in a state-run retirementplex. Jeff, along with twenty or so other cheerfully smiling volunteers of the Young Chrislamhinbuddhist League, had gone to the retirementplex to participate in the Companionship Hour with old citizens like him. Parker had wanted nothing to do with them, however. To seventeen-year-old Jeff he had been gruff and uncooperative, refusing

to participate in sing-alongs or Touch Another and Feel the Love group therapy sessions.

Ultimately, Parker had to be restrained and sedated by staff med-techs, then taken away to a maximum security “rehabilitation unit.” But in the brief seconds before he was removed, he clutched desperately at Jeff’s arm, glaring deeply into his blue eyes with his own—which were seething with an anger beyond anything a feeble old man should have been capable of. Hissing closely into Jeff’s ear, so no one else could hear, he said: “I was somebody important once, mate. Indeed I was! Not this decrepit husk of a bloke you see now. Why, I once owned ten thousand acres of prime farmland near here—until the Unification forces came in and took it all away. I was rich, I tell you! But a young brainwashed fool like you wouldn’t know what ‘rich’ meant, now would you? But you can know the truth! You can learn how we were rounded up—all over the world. People who look like me—like you! How we were forced to submit in the name of cultural diversity!”

Then, in the last seconds before two burly med-techs came rushing up, Parker blurted out his final words to Jeff: “Find out what really happened if you dare! Go to Kooroora, if it still exists. There’s an old space port there, built around 2075 Pre-Unification. Some of us made our last stand there. Deep down, in the ruins of Control Tower 7, are thousands of old-style datadisks. They’ll tell you what really happened! Hurry now! They’re coming for me! Thank God I had one last chance to pass on what I know—!”

And then old man Parker wept in young Jeff’s arms, as if in final release, before he was forever taken away.

Even now, Jeff remained emotionally shaken by that long-ago encounter, sitting there amid all the bright revelry of Skoolplex 619. And, remembering yet, he recalled that hot Australian afternoon when, in secret, he had gone off to Kooroora . . .

It had been risky, as Kooroora even back then had been designated by World Gov as a Forbidden Zone. Jeff went anyway, months after his encounter with old man Parker, to find the datadisks he had spoken of. And though Kooroora Space Port had been fenced off and posted with signs warning all not to trespass under severe World Gov penalty, he had violated the law and done so.

Finding Control Tower 7, he spent half a day making his way down the rubble-strewn stairwells into the bowels of the complex. Some fierce battle had taken place there, young Jeff realized, and the defenders had fought savagely to the end. At the bottom of the long-abandoned complex he found the datadisks, stored in sealed containers, as if they had been prepared for space transport—a transport that had never happened.

Adapting the old style datadisks to a present-day device, Jeff had sat there by

flashlight illumination reading for hours; and thus he learned of mankind's last days before Unification, of the horrors that had led up to it, and of the moment when it had finally—and forcibly—been achieved.

And he wept.

Wept for old man Parker and a world he had never known existed—a world both ugly and beautiful, both mean and heroic, a world that World Gov had erased from the minds of all those like him who had followed in its wake.

Leaving the datadisks where he'd found them, young Jeff returned home to Melbourne, never to be the same again. Nine months later, hungry to learn more of the years before Unification, he went back. Only, by then, the Kooroorra Space Port was gone. It had been eradicated, wiped out, obliterated. Nothing remained except windswept eucalypts and the lonely outback beyond . . .

"Dad? You okay?"

Jeff looked up again, his eyes only now beginning to refocus on the present. "What? Oh, sure, son. I'm alright. Must have been something I ate."

"Why did the future end for us, dad?"

"Future—?"

"Like you were saying."

Jeff shifted uncomfortably in his seat, fearing others nearby might be listening, even though the hubbub in the auditorium made that unlikely. Thinking of old man Parker, Jeff replied, "To make way for the world we know today, Adam. You see, men who looked like me once ruled the greater part of this planet. A long, long time ago, that is. Then we got hold of certain misguided notions about the white race being superior to every one else and we—well, we kind of ended up causing a lot of unnecessary pain."

Jeff reached over and took a sip of his champagne, then looked off across the vast auditorium, his voice far away, "We finally learned from our mistakes and tried to set things right but by then—well, it was too late. The Unification came about—and afterward the concentration camps . . ."

"Gee, dad, what are concentration camps?" Adam asked with the irritating persistence of a child who won't let go of a subject.

Li Ming, barely listening, now shot her husband a withering look of warning. She knew of her husband's youthful find at the Kooroorra Space Port, as he had long ago told her of it, shortly after their marriage in Asia Zone. She believed not a word of it, however, as she had unquestioning faith in everything World Gov proclaimed.

“Maybe he should know, Li Ming. You know they won’t ever teach it to him in History of Unification. And, as his father, I think he’s got the right to know the truth, sooner or later.”

“You don’t really know it’s the truth, Jeff. What you found in the Kooroora Space Port couldn’t have been anything more than the racist lies of those who stood against Unification. I’m ashamed that you, an educated skoolplex teacher, should even believe one word of it.”

“The concentration camps happened, Li Ming. Anyone who saw the proof I did could not deny it. The torture chambers, the mass executions of whites, the incinerators . . . And as a man dedicated to teaching I will teach it—even if means teaching it to my own son and no one else—”

Li Ming’s face tightened with suppressed anger, “There never were any concentration camps, Jeff! It’s leftover lies. Just that. Leftover lies—”

“Li Ming—”

“Oh, for Buddha’s sake! Don’t be a stubborn fool. If you tell Adam what you found at Kooroora, one morning he’ll be standing up and spouting off every lie he hears from you in History of Unification class.” She stood up, dark venom in her eyes. “Don’t you dare jeopardize our new life here, Jeff.”

“Li Ming—”

“I’m going off to mingle with some of the other guests,” she said, snatching up her glass of synthetic champagne. “Like you should be doing.”

Jeff looked after his wife as she walked off into the milling crowd, thinking now how foolish he had been. He should never have dredged up those nearly forgotten memories of old man Parker—or what he himself had found buried at Kooroora Space Port years ago.

And yet, he soberly reminded himself, the concentration camps had happened. He had seen the visual evidence himself, recorded in the dusty datadisks he had found. From Europe to North America to Australia, the Unification had enforced worldwide cultural diversity—though at a severe price. A price, Jeff knew, that World Gov assiduously denied to this very day.

Despite what he knew to be the truth, Jeff nonetheless had been humbled by his wife’s outburst. She was right, after all. He had absolutely no right to jeopardize his family’s new life here. Even if men like old man Parker had suffered during those terrible years, even if certain freedoms had long ago been lost to humanity, even if there had been mass exterminations with but a few men like himself knowing they had taken place

—none of it mattered anymore. All that mattered was the safety and well being of his family.

Turning to his son, Jeff finally said, “All you need to know is this, Adam: you and Puja are very lucky this kind of world came about, and maybe one day you’ll come to understand that.”

“So I can forget about the concentration camps?”

Jeff placed a hand on his son’s shoulder in warm reassurance. “Forget about them.”

Little Puja perked up, now that all the boring talk was over with, “Can I have dessert now, daddy? Adam ate his and he might try to steal mine.”

Jeff smiled, “Of course, sugarplum.” He reached for the last compressed soy cake, with its glaze of synthetic sweetening, and handed it to her, ignoring his son’s glint of envious hunger, as well as his own guilty desire.

As Puja bit into her dessert, she grinned a mouthful of crumbs and chimed, “Are you lucky too, daddy?”

Jeff nodded and smiled at her, despite a deep pit of doubt inside his stomach.

I have to believe that I am, sugarplum.

With all my heart . . . I just have to.





# Four

*"When we cannot find contentment in ourselves,  
it is useless to seek it elsewhere."*

*— La Rochefoucauld*

During Jeff's fifth year serving as Skoolplex 619's chief administrator, World Gov announced the euthanization of five million "nutritionally challenged" citizens in India Sector 22, due to unforeseeable crop failure. All who submitted willingly to euthanasia were posthumously awarded the state's highest public service medal. As for those who resisted the State's decision to put an end to their hunger, they were quietly rounded up by armed troops and swiftly taken away—never to be heard of again. For them, there were to be no posthumous medals.

After the long months of executions and mass incinerations had finally come and gone, the high priests of Chrislamhinbuddhism praised the "community spirit" of those that had willingly forsaken their hunger-ravaged lives inside one of World Gov's mobile euth-chambers, promising all that their departed souls would be rewarded "eternal salvation" in the holy names of Christ, Allah, Buddha, and Vishnu.

As for the rest of the world, they were called upon by the High Quorum of World Gov to set higher and yet higher examples of public spirited sacrifice should famine continue to spread—as most everyone suspected it would . . .

In Jeff's seventh year of service in Africa Zone 12, his son Adam, now sixteen, came to him late one evening while he busied himself catching up on his administrative duties inside his bungalow's tiny office. Of late, Jeff found himself busier than ever. Or was he just growing older and wearier? It was hard to say, since he was too tired to ponder it.

"Gee, dad, you look kinda worn. Maybe I better come back another time and—"

"Not at all, Adam," Jeff replied affably, managing a fatherly smile as he invited his son to have a seat in his cramped little office. "You know I'm never too busy to chat with you or your sister." He grinned. "That is, whenever she's around nowadays and not off on some overnight field trip with the Young Citizens League." Then, shifting into a more attentive posture, Jeff brought himself forward as he raised an inquisitive, tawny-hued eyebrow in his son's direction. "So, what's up?"

As Adam fumbled for words in a typically adolescent way, Jeff suddenly noticed just how much his son resembled him. Same blue eyes, same Anglo-Saxon features. And, save for a trace of his mother's Nordic heritage, evident in the slight upturn of his nose, Adam was definitely a handsome chip off the old block. Yet, on second thought, Jeff had reason for concern . . .

After all, considering Adam's renegade Caucasian looks, he was a far cry from the New Racial Standard of what nowadays constituted as "handsome." Would that unpleasant reality cause his son emotional anguish in the years ahead?

Jeff worried now that it might. For, in the painful years of manhood looming ahead, he would have to fight harder to win love, marriage, and a good career in the teeming, racially homogenized world where he would be at an obvious disadvantage. Like Jeff himself, he would have to struggle diligently to overcome his own stifling racial appearance in a world brimming with brown-skinned human beings.

Suddenly self-conscious of his own emotions, Jeff made an effort to refocus his mind. He loved his son too much to let him see his own inner hurt—a hurt that he realized had never completely healed. He well knew the pain coming Adam's way, different as he was from the majority of his peers. The unfriendly looks, the sly, malicious glances, the subtle and not-so-subtle slurs, as well as all the inevitable impediments to his future career. Jeff had endured them all. And yet, he had survived. His son could too. Only—why now did he look so troubled, so lost—?

"Go on Adam; tell me what's on your mind."

"Gee, dad . . . I don't know how to begin—It's just that I—I'm kinda unhappy about everything lately."

"About living here in Africa?"

"No, Africa's okay, I guess—Mom seems to like it here."

Jeff nodded vaguely over that. Since coming to New Theravada, Li Ming had grown quite accustomed to the relative luxury afforded a GS 15 administrator's wife. Extra Nomo-Hunga allotments, larger living quarters, private non-communal bathroom, special shopping privileges for ever more scarcer commercial goods, and, perhaps most coveted of all by her, membership in a Level 3 Chrislamhinbuddhist church otherwise off-limits to all citizens less than GS 15 in rank. For whatever else Li Ming was, egalitarian-minded she was not.

"We've made it at last, Jeff!" Li Ming had whispered excitedly to him seven years ago, on their first day of church attendance in New Theravada, sitting there listening to the church choir sing "Nearer to Buddha Art Thou." Now she was thoroughly entrenched in her new religious life—at this very moment away at some Chrislamhinbuddhist

function or other. In fact, he hardly ever saw her anymore, except at breakfast. And, of course, during the mandatory thrice-weekly church services all citizens were required to attend.

It was during those weekly church services that all Li Ming seemed to talk about anymore was their new choir director. She relentlessly praised his “spiritual qualities,” often in comparison with Jeff’s alleged lack of them. As it stood, Jeff had, for some time now, suspected Li Ming of getting “spiritual” herself with their new choir director, coming home late at night on several occasions with the smell of masculine sweat on her naked breasts as she crawled coldly into bed beside him.

Yes, all these things he saw ahead for his son, simply because of what he was. Career impediments, alienation, faithless wives—

Jeff felt his hand suddenly clench into a tight fist, just thinking about it. Then he glanced up and noticed his son staring at him.

“Dad—?”

Jeff relaxed his hand, but not his hidden anger. He smiled gently at his son. “What is it you’re unhappy about, Adam?”

“It’s about this field trip that my class is going on.”

“What kind of field trip?”

“It’s a First Time, dad, and I—” Adam lowered his blue eyes, too embarrassed to go on.

Jeff leaned back in his chair.

First Time.

Every teen had to go on one, sometime during his sixteenth year, as a required part of his educational curriculum. For without a satisfactory grade in First Time—with exceptions made only for unusual circumstances—graduation from skoolplex was impossible. As part of the process, each student had to pair up with a fellow student of the opposite sex (with those designated by the state as Homosexual Class paired up with a member of the same sex) for a three day wilderness outing. During the outing, all participants had to perform at least one exercise each in both oral and genital sex (with oral and anal sex required for all male homosexual students) as well as one satisfactory example of three-way sex, with the teacher serving as both instructor and third participant.

The objective of the wilderness outing was to insure that all students, especially the shy and unattractive ones, were guaranteed the experience of a government-mandated, socially-engineered “first fuck.”

Sitting there, Jeff recalled Counselor Yehudit's own words on the subject several years earlier: "Too much psychic trauma for too long was suffered by the unattractive, the unpopular, the socially inept youths of previous times, Jeff. First Time strives to eliminate that kind of psychological damage to all members of our youth. After all, what in the end are we after if not a healthier, better world—?"

What indeed . . .

Recalling his own First Time, Jeff now understood his son's reluctance to speak with him on such a sensitive matter. Even so, he knew that such an event served as an important bridge between childhood and adulthood, one that all youth were mandated by government edict to cross at age sixteen, emotionally prepared or not.

"Son—"

Adam looked up, his blue eyes barely able to meet his father's steady glance.

"It's just a part of growing up, Adam. Try to see it that way. It's a special time, really."

Adam lowered his head again.

"Adam—what is it you're afraid of?"

No answer—just a downward glance and anguished silence.

Jeff swallowed and leaned forward again. This was one of those delicate fatherly moments he'd known that sooner or later he was bound to face. "Is it the sex that you're required to perform? Is that what's troubling you, son?"

Still no answer.

Jeff bit his lower lip, perplexed. He knew that his son had had the required skoolplex courses in "22 Erectile Pleasures of a Responsible Young Citizen" this past term, along with extensive visual instructions in "Clitoral Satisfaction of Your Responsible Citizen Partner." So how could he not know what was required of him on First Time? Jeff wondered.

Then again—

Jeff's eyes softened. "Adam—look at me."

Slowly, his son raised his head.

"Adam—you've had the courses, the instructions, the visuals, the—ummm . . . live classroom demonstrations. So, what's troubling you? Last year at Group Masturbation you passed with flying colors according to Ms. Chambaka, your instructor. So what is it that's troubling you about all this?"

“My partner, dad—”

“Oh.”

So that was it.

“She’s—”

“Go on, son.”

Adam raised his head, youthful angst twisting his face. “She’s the ugliest girl in class!”

Ah, the trials and tribulations of youth, Jeff mused wistfully, recalling his own younger days. He leaned back in his chair once more as his eyes examined the ceiling with a faraway, thoughtful gaze. After a few moments of measured reflection, he said, “That bad, huh?”

“The worst girl in the class,” Adam blurted, looking down again.

So, Jeff thought. If that’s the real cause of Adam’s troubles, then he’d better scratch the idea of re-running Gov Health’s “22 Erectile Pleasures of a Young Citizen.” Sexual dysfunction apparently wasn’t Adam’s problem, thank Vishnu.

“Why not choose another partner?” Jeff suggested, suddenly enjoying the role of the all-wise father.

“No other girl in class wants to First Time with me,” Adam whispered in shame.

Now this just might be getting serious, Jeff realized, leaning forward again. A slight, paternal frown etched his face. “Did you ask any other girls in your class to be your partner on First Time?”

“Three others,” Adam sulked.

“I see. No takers, huh?” Straining hard to keep the tone of this father/son discussion lighthearted, Jeff nonetheless felt he was failing miserably.

Adam’s face collapsed in humiliated despair.

“Adam—I know how you must feel. I—”

Adam bolted upright, “You don’t know how I feel! All the guys in class but me got partners they can’t wait to go on First Time with! Jamal, Enrique, Tyrone, Hsuan, Mgubu, Bogwhan—all the guys! I asked this one girl named Shaniqah to be my partner and she—she laughed at me! And then I asked two other girls after her and—” Adam collapsed in his chair once more, his face buried in his hands. “None of the pretty girls want me, dad! And now Mr. Mukkerjee wants to assign me to the only girl in class nobody else wants and—” Adam’s voice broke once more and he began to sob, deep shameful sobs of pain

and utter humiliation.

“Mr. Mukkerjee is a fine teacher, Adam, and not at all an unkind man. If anything —”

“Then why is he trying to force me to go on First Time with Helga Schmidt! I asked him to assign me to a girl from the Harmony Project but he says none are available. Now I have to go with Helga just because nobody else wants her!” He looked up defiantly at his father. “I won’t go!”

“Everyone must participate in First Time, Adam. No one is allowed to be left out. Mr. Mukkerjee must comply with World Gov law and skoolplex rules.”

Adam fell into deep silence again.

“Helga—is she a new student in your class?”

Adam didn’t raise his head, but mumbled a response in a low, faraway voice: “She transferred in from North America Zone 9 two months ago—and now I’m the unlucky guy stuck with going on First Time with her. All the other guys are laughing at me behind my back and—” Only he didn’t finish this time, sinking into a deeper, more disturbing silence than before.

Jeff glanced at his deskkomp, chewing thoughtfully on his lower lip. As chief administrator for Skoolplex 619, and therefore Adam’s primary educational advisor, he had personal access to all staff and student records, even those of the most intimate nature. With that in mind, he spoke softly at the deskkomp, bringing up Mr. Mukkerjee’s “Sex Health 325” class, noting all the student names listed.

Then, whispering the name “Helga Schmidt,” he brought up her particular file. “Visual,” he added, and a full-face image of the girl in question appeared on the screen in front of him. He studied it for a moment, noting the long, reddish-orange hair framing a pink-cream complexion. Two startling eyes, the color of lavender dusk, stared back at him from an intelligent face. Finally, he requested a full nude image.

Nice, he thought.

Very nice.

“And this Helga is to be your partner?” Jeff started to say, before Adam cut him short:

“I won’t do it with her! I’ll get sick on that day! I’ll run away and—”

“Whoa there a minute, Adam. No need for any drastic measures. We’ll sort this thing out together and—”

“I tell you I won’t do it with her!” Adam shouted again, this time with deadly

intensity.

“Okay, okay. Settle down, son. You won’t have to do it with her. Okay?” Jeff sucked in a breath, then went on, “Now, in the meantime, I’ll have a talk with Mr. Mukkerjee. First thing tomorrow morning, in fact. I’m sure something can be worked out.”

“There’s no way it can be worked out, dad. Not when I look like—” Adam began, then abruptly cut himself off.

Too late, however, for his father not to have seen the raw look of hatred in his downcast blue eyes. Jeff had never seen such a look in Adam’s face before—the look of one hostile stranger towards another.

“Like what, son?” Jeff softly asked, feeling a rising sense of anger he didn’t want to feel.

Adam snapped up his head, “Like you! Like a freak! A freak with white skin and blue eyes that everybody else stares at! Like that!” He banged a knuckled fist into the wall. “Why can’t I look like my sister! She fits in everywhere she goes! Why couldn’t I have been born with dark hair and dark eyes like Puja! And skin that doesn’t make me stand out in a crowd at night! Why did this have to happen to me! Why! Why! Why did I have to be born looking like you!”

He rushed from the room.

For a long time afterward, Jeff sat there, staring down at his cluttered desk, as if he were looking down upon the scattered pieces of a broken little world. He sat there trying to figure it all out, his faithless wife and his tormented son. But he could make no sense of it. Tired, that was it. So goddamned tired lately. He rubbed his eyelids with the thumb and forefinger of one hand, sighing wearily.

But to what, or whom, or even why, he had no answer.

Later that week, Adam went on First Time with Mr. Mukkerjee’s class. A firm talk from his teacher had finally persuaded him into accepting Helga Schmidt as his partner. Thus, on their first night together in the African wilderness, the two sixteen-year-olds found themselves facing each other in awkward silence, not knowing what to do.

As it turned out, Helga was no more pleased with the situation than Adam. She too had wanted someone else for a First Time partner, in particular a stocky, copper-skinned youth of Afro-Irish-Mexican-Tahitian-Eskimo-Japanese-Maori-French heritage. But the youth had not wanted her, choosing instead a perfect Skintone Class 5 to First Time with. Now Helga and Adam were forced to settle for each other, or risk failing Sex Health 325.

After an uncomfortable hour of silence had passed between them, Helga finally stood up, determined to get a passing grade and the sexual experience she hungered for.

Stripping off her uni-suit, panties and bra, she knelt beside Adam and reached for his crotch.

“Give it to me,” she demanded.

Yet, the instant her hand seized at his member, Adam jerked away, his face twisted with hatred. Knocking her aside as he bolted to his feet, he shouted down at her about how ugly she was and how everybody in class knew they were nothing more than a pair of disgusting racial freaks trying to pretend they were just like everybody else.

Then Adam tore out of the bubble tent and ran off into the hot African night, leaving Helga crumpled and sobbing, her face buried in her hands, with nothing left within her but a deep and abiding hurt. A hurt that would remain with her for the rest of her life.

That semester, Adam Huxton failed Sex Health 325.





# Five

*“Equality is a slogan based on envy.”*

*— Alexis de Tocqueville*

Fireworks popped and sparkled in the streets of New Theravada as World Gov rang in the New Year. In Asia Zone 24 another fourteen million had died of starvation, though it did little to dampen the spirit of the celebration.

Festivities were everywhere.

In Skoolplex 619 there was dancing in the auditorium as five thousand student celebrants jerked and spasmed to the savage beat of African drums. Through it all Jeff Huxton, now approaching his forty-first year of life, stood in quiet, reflective pride over it all. There was much to be proud of, after all. Just last year he had been quietly informed by World Gov that his institution’s Harmony Project could be shut down, as it was now no longer needed. From Europe to Africa to Asia, there were simply too few racial extremes left in the world to justify its continued existence. And those few that did exist were already mated to their racial opposites, or soon would be. Thus, in honor of Jeff’s dedicated service to the racial ideals of World Gov, he was awarded a Good Service medal for a job well done, along with a complimentary three day holiday to Mecca.

To his surprise, Jeff had even received congratulations from Ahmad Yehudit, now long gone from Africa to a high post in World Gov. In his communication, Yehudit had said, “Praise Allah that all goes well with you, Jeff. I have heard many good things about your work at Skoolplex 619 these past few years. Perhaps, in time, we will meet again, under circumstances that neither you nor I can yet predict. Who knows? You may even find yourself one day transferred to the halls of World Gov at the behest of a certain political sponsor. Should that day ever come to pass, there is much here that would certainly open your eyes, as it has mine . . .”

Even now, Jeff still didn’t know quite what to make of it. Perhaps he had made a better first impression on Yehudit than he had previously believed. If so, it might eventually pay off, now that Yehudit was a member of World Gov. There was just no telling how high up the career ladder he might climb with someone like Ahmad pulling for him—perhaps even as high as a staff position at Beijing Education Central!

But no—that was sheer fantasy, Jeff realized, focusing again on the New Year

festivities taking place in the skoolplex auditorium around him. Yehudit was merely being diplomatic, extending a bureaucratic pat on the back to a lowly skoolplex administrator stuck in an African backwater. Besides, Jeff suspected he wasn't World Gov material anyway. Men like Yehudit might relish tinkering with the clockwork mechanisms of society, but he would not.

Even so, Jeff realized that a position with World Gov, should it ever be offered, might not be something he could very easily refuse. That is, not so long as he was married to Li Ming. In truth, she had driven him far beyond his own expected ambitions already, and would not hesitate to drive him yet further should the glitter of World Gov ever beckon. For that reason, he had kept Ahmad's communication secret from her.

Turning his attention once again to the New Year celebration exploding around him, Jeff watched as another group of African cultural dancers burst into the auditorium, their bare feet stomping the permaflect floor in savage, mindless fury as they whirled their bangled arms around and around in wild, hypnotic ecstasy.

In the month of Tammuz-Shawwal of that same year, Jeff's wife and daughter traveled to the Ivory Coast on a three day religious pilgrimage. The purpose of the pilgrimage was to celebrate the conversion of the former United States into a predominantly Muslim-worshiping country, an event that now lay far in the past. Since then, Chrislamhinbuddhism had swept the world, bringing four major religions, along with dozens of minor ones, under one theocratic boot. Thus, the holiday was celebrated more for sentimental reasons than anything else, and was largely ignored by the greater ruling body of World Gov.

Jeff had declined to go, however, as he had no desire to make the long monorail journey to Abidjan. Besides, Li Ming had not gone out of her way to persuade him to go, as once she might have on similar holidays in Europe Zone. In fact, she had opted to go along as the invited assistant of their church's choir director, a Skintone Class 6 man fifteen years younger than Jeff. "I've moved upward into a new spiritual plane," were his wife's parting words to him, "something you'll never understand, Jeff, since you've never cared much for the Church."

True enough, Jeff thought, looking now at the empty bungalow around him. With his wife and daughter gone and his son away at Cultural Diversity Camp, he was left to fend for himself for the next three days. He felt restless. The skoolplex, after all, was his only life. For the past eight years its steady ebb and flow of students had been the blood in his veins, the beat in his heart, the very breath in his lungs. Whenever it ceased to function, as it did on holidays such as this, he felt cast adrift, lost, left without meaning or purpose.

He realized there was something unhealthy in that fact, and reminded himself that he must acquire some new, outside interests. Perhaps his failure to do so all these years had caused his wife to drift apart from him, and the children as well . . .

Restlessly, Jeff got to his feet and paced over to the window, squinting out at the searing heat of an African afternoon. For a moment he thought of his son Adam, away for the holiday as well, with a group of other teenage boys at a state-run cultural diversity camp in Mogavishnu. Such camps were more symbolic nowadays than anything else, he knew, since there was very little in the way of cultural “diversity” left in the present world. In all truthfulness, it was something that occasionally troubled him.

For instance, he knew that Euro-ethnic culture, as it was known, was virtually extinct. It had been overrun by a largely Afro-centric world view long ago, before melding itself with its Asian-centric counterpart. In time, this Afro-Asian synthesis absorbed Latin-centric culture, thus setting the stage for the worldwide unification of humanity.

Once under the iron rule of the Unification, this multicultural alloy melted and fused yet again, eventually forming one globe-spanning monolithic culture under which all mankind came to live. The only significant victim—if one should dangerously risk the assumption that there was one—was Euro-ethnic culture. Two millennia of its history—along with many of its most noble achievements—had since undergone almost a century of deliberate, state-sanctioned revisionism.

In fact, the worldwide movement to revise the whole of Western civilization had begun long before the Unification, Jeff knew, recalling the forbidden datadisks he had discovered deep in the ruins of Kooroora Space Port years ago. From them, he learned the truth behind the fall of the United States and Europe, once their Euro-ethnic populations had been systematically demoralized by decades of anti-Western multiculturalism.

And, once demoralized, it was easy enough for a determined cabal of Western leaders, driven by the fervor of “multiculturalism at any cost,” to begin laying the foundation for the Unification. But first, they had to burn all historical bridges to the past. Only by so doing, they reasoned, would they be able to deny all future-born Euro-ethnic individuals any chance of ever regaining their heritage.

Towards that goal, then, legions of government-appointed historians, themselves driven by the same multicultural fervor as their leaders, methodically recredited hundreds of Euro-ethnic accomplishments to dozens of lesser societies over the next century, leaving nothing at the end but a dark labyrinth of lies no one in the present world could ever hope to untangle, disprove, or escape from. It was a deed best not

questioned too closely in the World Gov year of 94 U, Jeff knew. Not by the common citizen—and certainly not by skoolplex administrators like himself who quietly knew otherwise.

As for Adam, perhaps the camaraderie of other boys at cultural diversity camp would dispel the cloud of gloom hanging over him. Jeff hoped so. Yet, he had reason to doubt it, judging by his son's growing distance from his classmates and family. For, with each passing year, it was becoming more and more clear that Adam was having great difficulty adjusting to the fact that he was significantly different from the majority of his peers. Neither Jeff nor his wife had any solution to the problem, save for Li Ming's strident recommendation that Adam seek the immediate help of a mental health counselor.

Perhaps she was right, Jeff concluded, finally turning away from the window and wandering about the little bungalow again. Searching for something to do, he tried to get interested in reading a new academic publication, *Fifty Great African Inventions: From the Steam Engine to Penicillin*, but soon lost interest.

Drifting into the cramped kitchen, he spied Li Ming's prized geraniums on the window seal. For a fleeting instant he contemplated watering them. But that idea too lost its appeal, as quickly as it had come. On his way out again he popped a tablet of Nomo-Hunga into his mouth, letting the beef-flavored anti-hunger pill slowly melt on his tongue. It was a desperate attempt to savor even a wisp of taste, yet no satisfaction came of it.

Glancing at a wall clock, Jeff noted that this evening's scant meal of rice-cakes and synthetic fish sauce was still three hours away. As it stood, there was no way to get the government-installed foodmatik to dispense even a morsel of food one second sooner. So, he'd just have to wait, hoping the Nomo-Hunga would see him through until then.

Leaving the kitchen behind, he meandered down the hall towards his tiny corner office, hoping to catch up on a little administrative work. But ten minutes later, after dawdling over a report concerning a recent shipment of Skoolplex 619's lowest IQed students to Africa Zone 28 to begin their state-determined life's work toiling in the food processing plants, he gave up with a depressed sigh.

Rising from his desk, he drifted about the bungalow again, restless as a caged animal. After a fruitless effort trying to find something else to do, he finally headed towards the bathroom, in mind to remedy his depression with a cold shower. Along the way he suddenly paused beside the door to his son's room, not really knowing why. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that Adam stayed shut up behind that closed door so often of late, turning away from his family, his school mates, and the world

beyond.

Standing there, Jeff felt a pang of concern for his unhappy son. Since failing Sex Health 325, Adam had withdrawn further into himself, even though he had gone on to pass the course with a new partner the following semester. Now, he hardly spoke to anyone, including his own family.

The whole situation deeply troubled Jeff, remembering now young Hans Becker. Hans had been a former student of his back in Guadalajarastadt, during Jeff's final two years teaching in Germany Sector 182. Tall, blond, and blue-eyed, he too had endured similar difficulties in facing up to the fact that his dominant Caucasian appearance in a world of mostly browned human beings had made him self-consciously stand out as "ugly." Then, one frosty German morning, Hans solved his problem by looping a cord around his neck and leaping out the third floor window of the school's Cultural Diversity Hall.

For a moment, Jeff closed his eyes at the memory.

Hans Becker had been one of the brightest students to ever pass his way . . .

Thinking even further back, Jeff recalled his own troubled years trying to come to terms with what he was. Even fifty years ago, growing up in Australia Zone 5 had not been easy for someone with his genetic heritage. Before he had been born, a still young and ambitious World Gov leadership had ordered the importation of seventy-five million black Africans into Australia to racially "blend" the population. That had been during the time of old man Parker, and the period when the last interracial battles on Earth ended with the permanent subjugation of the white race.

As a teenager growing up in that racially blended society, Jeff too had endured a difficult time fitting in with his darker Afro-Euro peers, as Caucasian-looking people had become extremely rare in the racial landscape by that time. Like Adam, he too had been the class "freak," having had the misfortune of being born to one of the last sets of parents who were both "unblended." So, he understood the terrible Angst of boys like Hans Becker and his own son. As such, they were racial curiosities at best, and would remain so for the remainder of their lives.

Yet—could his son come to accept that fate?

Could he avoid the terrible pain that finally destroyed young Hans? In Jeff's mind, it seemed less likely with each passing day. For Adam looked different enough from the majority of his peers that he would likely suffer for it in uncountable ways for the rest of his life.

How many whites had suffered so!

How Adam suffered now!

And what if his son should consider Hans Becker's way out—?

Suddenly, Jeff pulled back from the door, never having considered that possibility until now. Was Adam already plunging down that same black pit of despair that had swallowed young Hans? Standing there, he considered the grim possibilities. Then, somewhat guiltily, he summoned open the door to his son's room. By law, no door could have a lock, except in certain government installations. Even so, this constituted a violation of the parent-child bond of trust Jeff had long tried to establish between himself and his children. Yet, something had kept Adam holed up inside this 8 x 8 cubicle for months on end, almost every day after skoolplex.

Only, what?

Resolutely, Jeff entered his son's room, noting the usual teenage boy's trophies of adolescence—hologram posters of various teen beauties, their brown-skinned bodies posed in naked allurement, a collection of sporting equipment, a deskkomp and wall monitor, bits and pieces of "muticultural art" that was neither African, Asian, European or Latin in nature, but an indistinguishable goulash of all four, a crucifix mounted on the wall above his bed next to a plaque of Muslim scriptures, a glosheen certificate indicating his official baptism in the church of Chrislamhinbuddhism at the age of seven—

The flotsam and jetsam of a young world citizen, Jeff mused.

Glancing further about the room, he noted nothing unusual out of place. Here and there he fingered a stray item, as if it were a strange artifact from another planet. At random, he pulled open a set of drawers set flush in the wall, feeling more than a little guilty as he exposed various items of clothing; a black jockstrap, several pairs of colorful briefs, a skinflex pull-over shirt celebrating the 90th anniversary of Unification, and the like.

Against another wall, he drew open another set of drawers, finding much the same. Nothing to be concerned about. Nothing amiss. Shrugging, he felt quite the foolish parent now for having invaded his son's privacy like this. It had been the first time in his life he had done so, and so he was quite relieved to discover it had been unnecessary.

Well, he thought.

That was it.

No dark secrets. What had he expected to find, anyway? Illegal drugs? Stolen Nomo-Hunga tablets? Blasphemous religious ravings scrawled across the walls? What? He turned around, his eyes sliding over everything once more, as if in final confirmation that all was as it should be.

Nothing—

Then, Jeff glanced up and noticed the ventilation grill.

It was hardly disturbing. Yet, it looked as if it had been recently removed, judging by a few barely discernable smudge prints around its rectangular edge. Jeff started to ignore it, really feeling like a damned meddling fool now. But something about the smudge prints bothered him. Had there been any service-techs in this bungalow since they'd moved in eight years ago? A few, he recalled, but none that would have had any reason to come into Adam's room. Therefore, Adam himself must have removed the ventilation grill.

Only—why?

On impulse, Jeff walked over to Adam's desk and pulled out a chair. Rolling it across the room, he shoved it up against the wall just beneath the ventilation grill. Carefully climbing onto the seat, he reached up and pried it free of its magnetic hold. Nothing inside. Just empty darkness and the cool susurrations of chilled air upon his hand.

He pushed his hand into the darkness, just to make sure.

Nothing.

His hand slid right.

Then—left.

Something.

Jeff swallowed, a thin razor of fear sliding across his heart as his fingers explored the contours of the concealed object. Slowly, ever so slowly, he withdrew the object and exposed it to view.

A plasma gun.

Jeff let go a strained breath of shock, confirming with a glance that the weapon was real. No citizen anywhere on Earth was permitted to own any kind of firearm—and most certainly not a plasma gun. Only the armed services and officers of Wopo—the World Police—could.

Precious Buddha, how had his son gotten hold of such a dangerous, forbidden weapon? he wondered. Yet, he had no answer to give as he reattached the ventilation grill, got off the chair, and shoved it back into place. Sitting down on his son's bed, he contemplated the fearsome weapon clutched in his hand. A single burst from it, on maximum charge, could demolish this entire bungalow, he knew.

Holy Shiva.



Reluctantly, Jeff forced himself to consider the implications of his son's concealed possession of a plasma gun—and the penalty for doing so: death. Not imprisonment—but death. After all, a world bulging with nineteen billion hungry mouths could not afford to imprison non-productive criminals for years on end. Therefore, death was the government-sanctioned solution to any crime that even remotely threatened the sovereignty of World Gov.

And certainly the possession of a plasma gun did . . .

Jeff lowered his head and felt sick.



*"Heresy is only another word for freedom of thought."*

— *Graham Greene*

The first thing he had to do was dispose of the weapon.

Even so, it was not a simple matter, for concealment of his son's crime was in itself a serious crime, one that carried the same penalty—death. But, if he succeeded in getting rid of the plasma gun without being seen, no one need be the wiser. Afterward, he could quietly deal with Adam.

Lifting the plasma gun in his hand, Jeff wondered now where his son had gotten it. Yet, far more disturbing to him, was why? Only, he had no time to think of it. Not now. Not when Wopo could trace this weapon. He knew little about firearms, but he knew enough to know that all weapons had built-in trace-sponders.

But—no.

Logic dictated that this particular plasma gun's trace-sponder had been deactivated. Otherwise, Wopo officers would have raided this bungalow long ago, Jeff reasoned. Still, merely having it in this dwelling posed great risk to his entire family. He simply had to get rid of it—and quickly.

Examining the weapon carefully, Jeff tried to determine how to remove its nuclear-charged powerpak. Finally, he flipped the butt of the plasma gun upward, exposing its bottom to view. There. Slide back that little plate . . .

Righting the plasma gun again, the powerpak dropped smoothly into the palm of his hand—along with something else. Setting the deadly weapon and the disengaged powerpak aside, what remained in the palm of Jeff's hand was a small, golden disk. A single word, etched into the metal, shone back at him:

Nayra

Jeff had no idea what the inscription meant—or from whom it had come. He lifted the thin disk of metal and examined it further, both sides of it, but found nothing else. Nothing but the cryptic word—and the plasma gun from whence it came.

Five minutes later, as Jeff prepared to slip out of the bungalow to dispose of the contraband plasma gun, something else kept nagging at the back of his mind. Something in Adam's room left unchecked—

Wandering back down the hall, the plasma gun now concealed in a small briefcase clutched in his hand, he entered his son's room for the second time, his face cast in a thoughtful frown as he suddenly realized what it was: Adam's deskkomp. Like himself, Adam was an inveterate record keeper of the day-to-day minutia of his life—storing bits of data on girls, students he liked and didn't, even personal thoughts . . .

Perhaps—

Jeff sat down at Adam's desk, once again fighting a twinge of paternal guilt as he began to search the deskkomp's memory files. No secret password or access code was needed, as World Gov had long ago outlawed such privacy practices, preventing all personally owned computer systems from being manufactured otherwise. Yet, after a thorough search of the files he came up with nothing of significance. He started to abandon the idea when he realized he had failed to examine the hundred or so datachips lying about on Adam's desk, on nearby shelves, even scattered carelessly about his feet on the floor. Well, neatness had never been one of his son's strong points, he recalled, gathering up all the datachips that he could.

Then, for the next two hours, Jeff carefully scanned the memory files of over sixty datachips, before he finally came to one particular entry. Listed simply as "N," he had almost passed it by in his rapidly accelerating search, so fatigued were his eyes and the growing conviction that there was nothing to find after all.

Expectantly, he whispered the letter "N" at the deskkomp.

A date flashed into view, followed by text:

17 Iyar-Sha'aban: "Had a weird day today. Really weird. I was walking home from the stadium after the big game between 619 and 770 when this blond-haired guy comes up out of nowhere and hands me a gold disk with some kind of message on it. He says come to Heroes of Humanity Park tomorrow at 3:00 if I want to hear more. More of what? I asked him. But the weird guy took off so fast I don't think he heard me. Or maybe he didn't have time to answer. Now that I sit here thinking about it, I remember seeing a Wopo airkroozer hovering over the area just before he took off. Like they were hunting for somebody. Maybe they were hunting for him. Anyway, I threw away the disk he gave me. Then I changed my mind and picked it up again. I'm looking at it now trying to figure out what it means. Kind of stupid, it seems. What's Nayra mean? My deskkomp couldn't even figure it out except that Nayra spelled backwards means Aryan. That's an old word that stands for white people. Freaks like me I guess. I don't know if I'll go

tomorrow—”

Jeff stopped reading for a moment, raising his own blue eyes in sad regret for his son’s tormented view of himself. After a time, he read on:

18 Iyar-Sha’aban: “I went. I’m not sure why. Curious I guess. When I got to the park it was full of people just like always. I sure felt out of place looking the way I do and all. Some little kids made fun of me. Skintone 7s, I think. So I told them to fuck off. But I get tired of it. My dad just doesn’t understand—”

I do son, I do.

He read on:

“—I wandered around like a dope for a few minutes then bought a bag of popcorn with my last ration token. Guess I’ll go hungry at skoolplex lunch tomorrow. Anyway, I sat down on a bench for awhile but I didn’t see that blond guy anywhere. In that park he would have stood out, alright. Just like me. After ten minutes or so, I got up to leave. Then this girl comes up behind me, real fast like. Like she’d been hiding nearby watching me. I don’t know that for sure but I kind of got the feeling that she had. It’s all pretty weird. Anyway, she grabbed hold of my arm like we were together or something and we began walking. I felt kind of funny about it all but I went along with her—”

Jeff skipped forward a bit:

“—told me her name was Emerald. Because of the color of her eyes, I guess. A real freaky green they were. She asked me all sorts of questions while we walked along. Like how did I like going to skoolplex and stuff like that. She asked me if I had a girlfriend and I got kind of red in the face because I don’t. It made me feel kind of stupid, her knowing that. Then she asked me how I felt looking so different from everybody else. I told her I didn’t like it. She smiled at me when I said that, kind of special like. No girl ever smiled at me like that. It made me feel good all over . . .”

Skimming further down the screen, Jeff continued:

“. . . later Emerald got to talking about some stuff I didn’t want to hear. Stuff about the world and how it came to be. She told me that a long time ago the world had hundreds of millions of white people in it. I didn’t like what she was saying and started getting scared. There were Wopo in the park, I said. And when you’re both Skintone 1s like us, you got to be extra careful about what you say. Only Emerald didn’t seem to care. She laughed, and told me she wasn’t scared of Wopo or World Gov anymore. That really got me edgy, and I started to leave. But Emerald wouldn’t let go of my arm, so I stayed and listened. She told me what happened just before the Unification. How the rest of the world wanted to conquer people like us. And when they couldn’t do it by force they got to calling us ‘racists’ so we’d feel bad about ourselves until we got weaker and weaker in

spirit. Then our enemies finally walked in and took us over. I tried to block it all out. I tried real hard. It was the same crazy shit my dad had told me long ago. And it was wrong. All of it. But I listened anyway because Emerald seemed to like me and because I don't have any friends . . ."

Jeff dropped tearful eyes away from the screen, too hurt for the moment to go on.

Poor Adam.

After a minute or so, he looked up again and read from the next entry, recorded on the 3rd day in the month of Sivan-Ramadhan:

"—went to Martin Luther King Plaza today. Saw some cultural exchange students from Europe Zone 19 there. From Holland Sector 3 I think. Don't know for sure. Anyway, they were trying real hard to do some sort of African ceremony dance but it looked kind of dumb to me. I started to laugh but I shut my mouth real fast. Laughing at anything called culture is against the law. I saw this Culture Counselor get real mad at one of the dancers, a Skintone 1 like myself. He started screaming real crazy at her for messing up. He said she'd better get it right or else. It made her cry. I started to walk away when a gang of Skintone 8s came up and threw rocks at her. One hit her in the eye and they laughed real hard. There was blood everywhere. Then Wopo showed up and took her away. After that, a fight broke out between the Skintone 8s and another gang of Skintone 3s. That happens all the time. Anyway, I sat by the fountain looking at the pigeons until Emerald showed up. She put her hand in mine and smiled kind of nice. I guess we really like each other a lot now—"

Jeff glanced over at the briefcase containing the deadly plasma gun. With ever-sickening fear, he now realized just what kind of person this Emerald had to be. A terrorist. Part of some secret terrorist faction working against World Gov. And now, she was luring his emotionally vulnerable son down a dark path towards destruction.

He forced himself to read on, anger now kindled into flame:

16 Sivan-Ramadhan: "—we took the monorail out of New Theravada after Emerald did something funny to our bracelets so we could board it without World Gov permission. I don't know what exactly. She used some weird gadget I've never seen before. It looked illegal but I didn't ask her about it. We headed south into Sector 71. I got kind of scared going that far away without World Gov knowing where I was. Emerald didn't seem to care. She got angry when I mentioned it so I shut up. Later we stopped in Johannesburg and got off. We left the monorail station and caught a pubtram to the edge of town. Emerald sat real close to me. She smelled nice. Maybe twenty minutes later we got off near some abandoned industrial section—"

Jeff skimmed forward again, reading fragments of his son's frightening descent into

the midst of a terrorist group:

“. . . I met Nayra's leader today. He's a guy who used to work in a factory or something. I'm not really sure. Anyway, his name is Karl Ramstrom. Everybody in Nayra seems to like him. I kind of like him too. He makes you feel like you're worth something whenever you're around him. Until now, I've never felt that way about myself . . .”

Jeff dropped his eyes for a moment, hearing again all the bitter pain in his son. Then, with ever-mounting difficulty, he skipped forward to the present month's entries:

9 Tammuz-Shawwal: “—now that I've been a member of Nayra for the last two months I don't feel so weird about it anymore. At first, all the crazy talk about escaping from World Gov didn't seem real to me. It does now. We can do it. Our leader's kind of strange but I think he knows what he's talking about. Emerald says he can fly the solarship if the forty of us can somehow capture it. That means we'll have to steal one from Johannesburg Space Port. It's pretty scary just thinking about it. Mars is a long way off . . .”

Jeff stopped reading for a minute and stared blankly at the wall in front of him. Capture a solarship from Johannesburg Space Port? Forty members armed with plasma guns? Mars? He grew very cold inside as he forced himself to read on:

18 Tammuz-Shawwal: “—more training with the plasma gun today down in the abandoned mine shaft. We haven't much time left Karl tells us. Even so, he makes sure we go on with our regular lives like nothing's changed. Just so nobody suspects. It's pretty easy, fooling mom and dad and my dumb sister. Still, it's starting to get me down. Several times they've asked me where I've been all day. I told them some lie about going for long walks with a new friend I have. Just so they believe everything's going okay with me. But most of the time I stay in my room, planning for the day when we make our escape to Avalon Colony—and Mars. And we will, soon enough. Then World Gov can never hurt our people again . . .”

Jeff pressed his forehead into the palm of his hand, finding it increasingly difficult to read any further. Yet, he had no choice but to continue: 22 Tammuz-Shawwal: “Emerald is pregnant. She told me so today. She says it's our last chance to bring another one of our kind into the world. When Karl heard the news, he took us both into his arms and held us close . . .”

There was one final entry:

25 Tammuz-Shawwal: “At the end of the week I'm going away to Cultural Diversity Camp. If it were possible, I would refuse. But Karl says I must. So does Emerald. It's because we must all go on pretending that nothing has changed our lives. But now that I know what the world did to our kind long ago, it's hard not to take my plasma gun and

burn down every face that believes in the goodness of World Gov, and what they stand for. Only, I have to hold my anger in, because the time for our escape is near. In less than a week, we plan to make our move. It will come on African Achievement Day, the morning after my return from camp. That's when space port security at Johannesburg will be at a minimum. Now, I must end this journal for good. Karl warned us once not to keep any records, but I had to. It's the only rule of his I've broken. I feel kind of bad about it, and keep telling myself I should destroy it. But now that Emerald is pregnant with our son I know I can't. I want him to read this journal one day, just so he'll understand what his mom and dad had to do to win his freedom . . ."

Lifting his eyes, Jeff slowly turned away from the deskkomp and stared into the distance. So, Nayra intended to strike against Johannesburg Space Port on African Achievement Day—a mere two days from now. Grim with fear, he tightened his fist around the gold disk in his hand, knowing he could not enlist the aid of Wopo without revealing his son's involvement in the Nayra plot. Nor could he attempt to persuade Adam not to go. That would only alert his terrorist comrades that their plan had been compromised. In revenge, they might seek Adam out and kill him.

No, it was clear now what his only course of action could be. As soon as his son returned from Cultural Diversity Camp, he would have to track his movements every step of the way. And that meant tracking him all the way to Sector 38 and the dark lair of his terrorist friends.

Coldly, Jeff rose to his feet, his decision made.

Pulling the datachip out of the deskkomp, he tossed it back amongst the litter on the shelf where he had found it. Then, reluctantly, he returned the plasma gun back to its hiding place, its powerpak and golden disk restored.

Now he would wait.





# Seven

*"A coward turns away, but a brave man's choice is danger."*

— Euripides

On the morning following Adam's return from Cultural Diversity Camp, Jeff awoke early, dressed, and padded softly down the hall to his office. Beyond the room's solitary window a bright African sun rose sluggishly on the horizon, casting his face in reddish-amber light as he sat down at his desk.

Today was the day, he thought.

African Achievement Day.

The day Nayra—and his son—would attempt their desperate bid for freedom.

Jeff had no choice now but to carry through with his plan. His son had to be saved from himself, for the alternative was unthinkable: execution inside a euth-chamber—or permanent exile from his family on Mars.

Turning to his deskkomp, he made an effort to distract himself with a little early morning work as he waited patiently for the rest of his family to stir from slumber.

An hour later, as he put the finishing touches on a report to South Africa Education, he became dimly aware of his wife and daughter, now up and about, chatting amiably in the kitchen as they prepared their morning breakfast of nutricakes and protein drink.

He was achingly hungry himself, but he made no attempt to leave his office. It was next to Adam's room and he wanted to take no chance that his son might slip out unobserved. So he waited, popping a quick Nomo-Hunga into his mouth. In the interval, his wife and daughter had moved into the living room, still babbling pleasantly to each other about their upcoming day—Li Ming off to an African Achievement Day celebration with her church choir, Puja off on a skoolplex field trip to the Museum of Great African Inventions of the 19th Century in downtown New Theravada.

Adam himself was scheduled to participate in a Responsible Young Citizen's Swahili basket weaving demonstration at the Jomo Kenyatta Civic Hall. That event would begin promptly at nine, less than two hours from now. It was rumored that Governor Babinga himself might be in attendance at today's festivities, Jeff knew. If so, it was a great honor for all skoolplex participants, and certain to earn his son a coveted

Responsible Young Citizen's Award from World Gov. Only, to Jeff's regret, he realized his son might never receive that award.

At that moment the door to Adam's room hummed aside. Jeff tensed, slowly rising to his feet as the sound of his son's footsteps in the hallway drew him cautiously towards the open doorway of his office. There Adam stood, backpack strapped to his husky young shoulders. Jeff had no doubt that inside that backpack, stuffed in among the few personal items he was taking, was the deadly plasma gun.

For a moment, it seemed to Jeff as if his son were hesitant about proceeding any further. Then, shaking off his moment of indecision, he walked on down the hall into the living room where his mother and sister still sat, chatting about the day's upcoming events.

Creeping forward, Jeff padded softly down the hall until he paused, in the shadows, at the entrance to the living room. He watched his son head straight for the door, his face stern with purpose. Then, suddenly, he halted, as if an unseen hand had reached out and stayed him. For the briefest of moments the sternness in his face dissolved, revealing once more the boy Jeff knew and loved as his son.

"Mom, I—"

Li Ming and Puja stopped chatting and looked up from where they sat, their expressions tentative, as if they were gazing upon a pleasant stranger who had smiled at them in passing.

"I guess . . . I guess I just wanted to tell you goodbye." He looked towards Puja, "You too, sis."

I knew you couldn't leave us without saying goodbye, Adam! You still love your family, no matter what you wrote in your journal—no matter what Nayra did to your mind!

"Tell dad . . . tell him goodbye for me. Will you?"

Oh, Adam! Don't do this! Jeff wanted to shout. He ached to run to him, to hold him for dear life, to never let him go. But even as he thought it, it was too late, for his son stepped out the door and was gone.

Jeff entered the living room an instant later, his heart racing. Adam had set into motion a dangerous chain of events and it was now up to him to break that chain.

"You off so early, Jeff?" Li Ming asked, not really interested one way or the other.

"I've some unfinished skoolplex business to take care of downtown," he answered in a rush, glancing out the window at his fast-disappearing son.

“But today’s African Achievement Day—”

“Even so—”

“My, my, Jeff. I haven’t seen you this urgent since the first time we made love.”

“I might be late getting home today, Li Ming. I’ve a lot of important—”

“Oh, don’t bother to explain. Do whatever it is you have to. Besides, you’re just like your son. He was in such a hurry too. Left here like he was rushing off to catch a rocket to the moon.”

If you only knew, Jeff thought, pressing the door open.

He left without saying goodbye.

Jeff followed Adam into downtown New Theravada, taking care to maintain a discreet distance from him. Melting into the crowd as best as his racial appearance would allow, he waited for his son to board the monorail for Johannesburg. As he did, Jeff recalled Adam’s illegally modified bracelet, permitting him unauthorized travel. Jeff himself had no such need of authorization, now that he ranked a GS 17. At least, not so long as he confined his travel to within the borders of Africa Zone 12.

With Adam now out of sight, Jeff quickly wove his way through the teeming crowds of the monorail station and boarded two cars behind him. Finding a seat, he settled into it, certain his pounding heart must be audible to those around him. Yet, no one paid him any attention, save for a few curious glances at his pale-skinned face.

A moment later the monorail slid out of the station.

Johannesburg lay some two hundred kilometers south of New Theravada, Jeff knew. But with a monorail speed approaching five hundred kilometers per hour, the trip would be brief.

Even so, he burned with tension.

Twenty minutes later the monorail slid into Johannesburg, passing long, colorful rows of World Gov housing projects. Jeff had spent much of his early life living in such projects as these, in various parts of the world. True, they lacked all sense of aesthetic beauty in their stark sameness. Nevertheless, Jeff saw in their monolithic uniformity the very crystallization of world peace. For World Gov had long ago forcibly redistributed the planet’s wealth, lancing the obscene pustules of privilege endemic to America and Europe and Japan, and leaving at its end neither economic peak or valley where wealth or poverty could fester.

It came not without a price, however.

The price had been worldwide submission to World Gov.

Now, no nation on Earth was exempt from its rule, no people exempt from its law, no individual exempt from its reach, no thought exempt from its judgment.

For World Gov controlled everyone.

Everywhere.

All the time.

Only not everyone had bowed to the brave new world of World Gov, Jeff remembered. Some fifty thousand Euro-ethnic people from Europe, America, and Australia had banded together to defy the new world order, fighting a bloody last stand against advancing Unification forces before escaping in a fleet of solarships to the Martian colonies.

As to the fate of those Euro-ethnic people left behind, they were destined to die by the millions inside Unification gas chambers, a fact that had been systematically erased by World Gov historians long ago. Now, no record of World Gov's genocidal holocaust existed anymore, save in the minds of a few individuals like himself.

Yet, he tried not to think about it.

For whatever horrors World Gov was guilty of made no difference anymore. It was all in the past. And the past was dead. All that mattered now was saving his son. He had to keep his mind focused on that—and nothing else. And if saving Adam meant killing every member in Nayra—then so be it. For Jeff Huxton would do anything to save his son.

Anything.

A moment later he got off the monorail. Locating Adam in the shifting crowds, Jeff hurried off after him, a pale-skinned oddity in a world of umber-toned normality. Maneuvering through the bustling monorail station, he pushed against thick, dark masses of humanity. Once or twice Adam paused and glanced back, checking to see if he was being followed.

To avoid being seen, Jeff lingered here and there along his pursuit, turning his blue-eyed face into the onrushing crowd, as if in some strange, communal embrace. Then, glancing around again, he would see Adam vanishing into the distance—causing him to dart frantically through the bustling throngs to pick up his trail again.

Outside the monorail station, he found Adam again, heading quickly down the crowd-choked street. Jeff dodged and shouldered his way after him, a hot sheen of sweat breaking out on his pale, sun scorched face. For an instant everything closed in on him

like a powerful, crushing vise—streaking pubtrams, rushing people, the cacophony of teeming 22nd century life in a world bursting at the seams with nineteen billion human beings. All of it smote him at once as he pursued his quarry through the hot stench of too much humanity baking under the burning rays of too much sun.

Nausea knotted up inside his stomach.

Mars . . .

Remote as a fading dream.

The place where his son wanted to go . . .

Jeff fought down his nausea and pushed on through the crowds, mumbling a “Bless Allah” here or a “Praise Jesus” there every time he thumped or bumped or jarred or jostled the head-bobbing flow of humanity streaming past him.

“This is the world, Adam! Why can’t you accept it? I did! God damn you—I did!”

Ahead, he saw Adam suddenly jump aboard a pubtram.

Hustling forward through the onrushing crowd, Jeff ran desperately to catch the same pubtram before it pulled away into the madhouse of traffic and was lost to sight. Reaching it seconds later, he hopped into the end car of the three car vehicle—two cars behind his son. He had paid nothing—all local transportation was free worldwide. What benefits to all, Jeff thought in self-righteous anger as the pubtram pulled away and veered northeast through Johannesburg. It was all free, he shouted to Adam two cars ahead, there from the silence of his own thoughts. Free education, free food, free housing—and a guaranteed place in the world.

No—it might not be everything, son.

There is still greed, bitterness, and pain even in the World Gov year of 94 U. We dull hunger with pills and crops still fail, dooming millions to an early grave. And yes — individuals like you and I and Hans Becker still carry the racial mark of Cain of our Caucasian ancestors’ reprehensible past. We have a lot to live down, son. You, me, any and all who bear the blue eyes and light skin of those who once ruled this world. We are the racial bison of humanity trodding towards extinction, the passenger pigeon and the dodo bird and the tiger, all now ashes on the wind.

Accept it!

Live what life you can and accept it!

I did!

Jeff sat there amid all the human chaos passing him by, gritting his teeth with a smoldering, impotent anger. He had lived it all, accepted it all, the rules, the regulations,

the edicts, the rewritten histories. He had knuckled under to the insurmountable force of World Gov.

Adam would too.

He must!

The pubtram slithered past countless housing projects, all pink and lavender and lemon hued, all choked with seething, raucous, dark-skinned humanity. Faces blurred past him, smeared past him, ran like melted wax down a thousand sun-baked streets, all brown flowing into brown flowing into brown. The face of Ahmad Yehudit, he thought.

The Ideal.

Oh God, son—accept it!

Jeff suddenly jerked up.

The pubtram had come to a halt near a run-down industrial area. And Adam was getting off! Rising hurriedly from his seat, Jeff pushed his way through a tangled mass of sweat-stained shoulders, breasts, and buttocks as he jostled his way down the aisle, murmuring an occasional “Buddha be with you” lest someone take offense at his hasty departure. A few other passengers had gotten off with Adam as he exited through the forward door, momentarily concealing Jeff’s departure through the rear one.

Once outside, Jeff darted towards a nearby cluster of palms growing beside the rusting remains of a factory, quickly disappearing from sight. Adam, never once catching a glimpse of him, moved on into the distance.

After waiting three or four minutes, Jeff finally stepped free of his hiding place. By now, the pubtram was long gone, along with the few passengers that had gotten off with he and Adam. Wandering away in various directions, they had vanished amongst the rusting wilderness of factory towers.

As for his son—

Jeff spotted him now, cutting across the weed-choked grounds of another abandoned factory in the near distance. Without further delay, he started after him. As he trod down the cracked walkway past long stretches of rusting chain-link fence, Jeff realized now where he was. This was one of the Old Sections he had often heard about but never visited, left over from a time before the Unification. Once, a mighty industrial area such as this would have throbbed with titanic activity—and had—until the wealthy foreign countries controlling it were all taken over by a newly-formed World Gov.

Even now, the evidence of that former control still stood boldly emblazoned across one derelict factory after another that Jeff passed along the way:

USA Astronautical Systems Inc.  
Stellar-Dyne Corporation  
Fujihara Hyperfusion Technologies  
Martian Bio-Habitat Company  
Euro-Australian International Food Products  
Rearden Steel—South Africa Division  
British Hover Car Ltd.

All of them long dead . . . Jeff realized. But then—the Unification had never intended for them to survive.

Turning, he walked on.

Ahead, Jeff glimpsed three young men emerge, laughing, from a nearby housing project, one of several that stood on the fringe of this abandoned industrial complex. They stopped and stood in the sparse shade of a date palm, perhaps awaiting the arrival of some friends before they all went off to enjoy the festivities of African Achievement Day. He hoped they would leave soon, since he feared being seen cutting through the abandoned factory grounds as Adam had done a few minutes before. Otherwise, they might inform Wopo.

However, as Jeff approached, they suddenly looked up and took notice of him, dark consideration in their eyes. He saw them whisper something amongst themselves, then nod at each other before wandering off down the street. It hurt Jeff to admit it, but the sudden sight of his Class 1 skintone had probably caused them to run off. As a young man, he had far too often been stung by such rejection, done more out of contempt for his racial appearance than out of any actual fear of him. Yet, seldom had he allowed himself to show any outward evidence of offense.

Only, deep inside . . .

No time for that, he reminded himself, keeping a sharp eye on Adam's progress through the sprawling factory grounds just ahead. Twice, his son spontaneously jerked around, causing Jeff to freeze in his tracks. And, each time, he prayed to Allah that he hadn't been seen.

A short while later Jeff came to a halt in front of a long-silent fountain, which stood next to the main entrance of the dead factory complex his son was now passing through. The fountain looked to him as if it had been added sometime after the factory's initial construction, when such facilities as it had continued to function, at least for a time, in the aftermath of the Unification. Now, a rust-stained statue, streaked with pigeon



droppings, rose out of the fountain's stagnant green water. An inscription, barely legible, stood engraved on the base of the statue:

“By Any Means Necessary”

The words held no significance for Jeff, as little they would for anyone passing this way. The statue, and the man it honored, was merely another World Gov tribute to a now forgotten member of a lost generation of Pre-Unification individuals. Individuals who had, in some obscure manner, lent their ideological force to the making of the world that came to be.

Leaving the statue of Malcolm X behind, Jeff moved on into the weed-strangled grounds of the abandoned factory. Ahead, he saw Adam pause at the entrance of a cavernous, metal-walled building. Then, suddenly, his son whipped around in the direction he had come, searching for a long, careful moment. Perhaps he had sensed someone's presence behind him, Jeff thought, or had caught a fleeting glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye. Whatever the case, it was possible Adam might have spotted him.

Taking caution into hand, Jeff froze in the shadow of a giant industrial crane, motionless as the dead factory surrounding him. Then, after half a minute more of intense scrutiny, his son finally turned away again and disappeared into the hulking industrial building.

Relieved, Jeff swiped a hand across his sweat-burnished face and doggedly pushed on. He was not used to this kind of exertion, considering the life of a skoolplex administrator was largely a sedentary one. Still, he had kept pace so far. Now the time had come to make a mental reconnaissance of the situation. He was alone and unarmed. He could not summon Wopo to his aid—his son Adam would be arrested, along with the rest of Nayra, then tried, sentenced, and executed.

No, he had to act alone.

Reaching down, Jeff retrieved a length of rusted metal pipe from the ground. It was no match for a plasma gun, but it would have to do. Now armed, he would have to overpower a single Nayra terrorist and steal his weapon, then do his damndest to destroy the whole evil nest of them. It wasn't the cleverest of plans, Jeff grimly realized, but it was the only one he had . . .



# Eight

*“All men dream, but not equally. Those who dream at night, in the dusky recesses of their minds wait in the day to find that it was vanity. But the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dreams, with open eyes, to make it possible.”*

— T. E. Lawrence

As soon as Adam was out of sight, Jeff darted towards the looming industrial building, weaving his way through a jumble of century-old machinery, rusted and overgrown with weeds. It was fitting, he thought, that Nayra should have hatched their filthy scheme amid this ancient rubble. As with it and the world it had once belonged to, their beliefs were also obsolete, worn out, and useless. He would not allow his son to perish simply because others were discontented with life in the 22nd century.

Coming to the edge of the giant industrial building a minute later, Jeff crouched against its metal-walled façade. Rising a hundred meters high, it stood as an ancient temple to Western ingenuity and bygone capitalism. And somewhere within that gigantic edifice lay Adam, even now preparing to set out on a self-destructive course that would only lead him to the inside of a World Gov execution chamber. No matter what, Jeff had to stop him from embarking on that fatal path.

Gripping the metal pipe in his hand even more tightly, he scrambled along the edge of the building towards the gaping, doorless entrance. Reaching it seconds later, he peered around the corner. No sign of life stirred anywhere inside the cavernous structure. All was quiet, dusty gloom. Here and there thin columns of harsh African sunlight slanted down from random holes in the roof, penetrating the inky blackness. Yet, the light did little to relieve the darkness; if anything it only served to emphasize it. Jeff welcomed it, however, as he rounded the corner of the entrance and darted headlong into the black depths of the building.

As he moved stealthily between tangled masses of machinery, thick musty odors of rust, century-old oil, and oppressive rot hung heavily on the stagnant air. Once, this factory had manufactured hover cars, Jeff knew, back when individual citizens could own private means of transportation. But in a world bloated with nineteen billion hungry, clamoring human beings, that selfish luxury was long gone.

With his eyesight now adjusted to the gloom, Jeff could make out more of his

surroundings. Ahead, beyond long- silent conveyor tracks that had once moved hover cars along the assembly lines, he caught sight of what appeared to be a multi-storied structure rising up out of the stadium-sized floor, all the way to the metal-roofed ceiling. Some sixth sense told Jeff that inside that structure he would find Nayra—along with his son Adam.

Moving forward it along the dead, rusting remains of the assembly lines, Jeff kept his eyes alert for the slightest movement in the darkness ahead. Twice, rats darted across his path, causing him to lurch backward in startled surprise. And once, a huge snake endemic to this part of Africa slithered past, almost causing him to cry out. Realizing then that the entire building must be infested with tarantulas, scorpions, and other deadly creatures, he moved more carefully from then on.

Finally nearing the multi-storied structure, Jeff approached it with great caution. It was six stories tall, judging by six consecutive bands of wrap-around windows rising upward along its silver metal façade. Yet, nothing but utter blackness shone from behind the dust-streaked windows, Jeff observed. Even so, reason convinced him that there must be interior rooms to the building, rooms without windows where Nayra terrorists could, in the hidden glow of portable lights, plot in secret. It was inside one of those windowless rooms that Adam must—even now—be making last minute preparations with his desperate compatriots to depart for Johannesburg Space Port. That is, unless I can save him, Jeff prayed, clenching the metal pipe in his hand ever tighter as he moved on.

Slipping past a glass-doored entrance into the multi-storied structure seconds later, he passed by several long-dead elevators until he came to a doorway at the end of the corridor. Thanks to the near-permanence of the building's luminescent signs, even a century later he could still make out the single glowing word inscribed above it: Stairs.

Cautiously, Jeff pushed aside the sliding door, its power-driven mechanism long inoperative and reduced to manual operation. Then, with metal pipe still clutched in hand, he slowly made his way up the stairwell.

As he moved along in utter blackness, he slid his free hand up the left side of the wall, keeping his ears attuned for the slightest noise of another human presence. Yet, he heard nothing, save for the faint rustling of hidden creatures scurrying up and down the six floor stairwell.

At the next floor he cautiously pushed aside the stairwell door, stepping carefully into the corridor. Gray, dismal light, filtering through a section of dust-streaked window at the far end, revealed a long row of closed doors going off in both directions. Drawing a breath, Jeff padded down the gloomy passageway, passing by luminescent name plates of

long-vanished corporate officers. The sight of their glowing, long-dead names cast an eerie pall over the entire scene, more frightening in a way than the deadly snake he had encountered earlier.

For here lay the ghostly reminders of the Old World, the world old man Parker had once lived in, the world of rank and privilege and unrestrained financial power that had once run roughshod over the planet's weaker economies. The world that World Gov finally destroyed, Jeff remembered, listening in turn at each closed door as he passed by its way.

Presently, he came to an intersection in the corridor and turned left.

Several doors stood open, evidence that others had come this way. Pausing at one, Jeff peered in.

Nothing.

Nothing at all, save for impenetrable blackness. He started to turn away and move on when a fist suddenly burst into his face. Before he could react, a second fist knocked him hard against the wall, dislodging his weapon. Then a third blow dropped him to his knees. Fading into unconsciousness, he never felt the fourth.

Jeff came to, blood trickling from the edge of his mouth. Three men stood over him, watching him impassively.

"Get him some water," the oldest one finally said, a man with grayish-red hair and a firm chin. At his command, a flask of water appeared and pressed against Jeff's bruised lips. When the flask was withdrawn a moment later, the oldest man stepped forward into the bluish glow of a portable light. The eerie luminescence caught for an instant in the lines of his face, revealing a pair of deep-set green eyes, a square jaw, and a wide, lined forehead.

"I regret that I had to hit you so hard. I thought you might be armed with a plasma gun."

Jeff rubbed his sore jaw. "Would it have made a bit of difference if you'd known otherwise?"

A slow smile creased the older man's lips. "Considering the situation, I'm afraid not, friend."

Jeff nodded warily as he slowly struggled to his feet. Standing now, he faced his three captors. "From my bracelet you must already know who I am. And why I came here."

"Yes, Mr. Huxton. We know who you are." Two green eyes hardened. "And why you came here."

"And who are you?" Jeff asked, directing his glance specifically at the older man.

"I am Karl, leader of Nayra."

For a moment, Jeff said nothing. Yet, he could not take his eyes from the man. So this was Karl—the mysterious stranger who had won his son's undying loyalty. Now, seeing him in the flesh for the first time, Jeff realized he was a far cry from the disgruntled, malcontented factory worker he had expected him to be.

To the contrary, Karl Ramstrom was a man brimming with confidence, an attitude now almost extinct in the politically straight-jacketed, obedient world of the 22nd century. An attitude, Jeff suspected, that should have sent someone like him to a Behavioral Modification Facility long ago.

"Where's my son?" Jeff demanded, now refocused on the reason for his being here.

Karl nodded in the direction of the corridor. "Safe with us." He ventured another step forward, examining Jeff more closely. Then, he said, "Now that I see you are somewhat recovered from your injuries, it's time we were off."

"Off?"

"To Johannesburg Space Port."

Jeff mentally recoiled at the sudden mention of Johannesburg Space Port. It was there, at that heavily guarded facility, that Nayra intended to launch its suicidal mission to reach Mars.

"I know all about your plan, Karl. And you haven't a chance of getting away with it."

"That remains to be seen."

"Listen to me. Do what you will but give my son back to me. After that, you and your happy little bunch can all run off to hell, for all I care."

Karl grinned with amusement. "I think I'm beginning to like you, Jeff. You're one of the rare men left on this planet that hasn't been thoroughly beaten down by World Gov."

"I've been beaten down more than you think."

"I think you're wrong, Jeff. I think you're a man of exceptional courage." Karl half walked around the wary skoolplex administrator, as if examining an interesting new object in his possession. "I could use a man like you."

"For what?"

"To help us reach Mars—and freedom."

"No deal, Karl. I'm quite happy right where I am."

"I doubt that. Your face says otherwise."

Jeff looked away, knowing it was true.

"I know what you're thinking, Jeff. That I'm some evil Rasputin who has somehow taken over the minds of your son and all these other young men and women. That I somehow brainwashed them into betraying their loyalty to the good and benevolent World Gov. But you'd be wrong. They came to me of their own free will, seeking a way out of this living nightmare they find themselves trapped in."

Karl turned and walked over to a tall, blond youth standing near the doorway. "Take Brock here, for instance. Like your son, he too found his way here some months ago. He too suffered from the same kind of social rejection that your son did in this racially-blended society of ours. Both boys were rejected, tormented, and shunned by their peers in school. As, I'm quite certain, you must have been too. That is, if you're honest enough to admit it."

"I'm honest enough to admit to it," Jeff replied. "And I went through hell because of it. But I survived, Karl. Do you understand me? I survived. So too can my son. And so too can all the rest who are born like us." He glanced hard at the three of them. "Running away solves nothing."

Karl reached out and clasped Brock's shoulder in a fatherly manner. "There is more to life than mere survival, Jeff. Or have you forgotten that? There is love and happiness and a feeling of camaraderie with one's own kind. Ask yourself right now if you've ever experienced those kinds of feelings in the world we live in—with the people who surround you."

Jeff had no answer to give, and remained silent.

"Let me tell you about Brock here. He was born to white parents in South America Zone 9 twenty-four years ago. When Brock was seven, his mother committed suicide after three Skintone 5s beat him up. In fact, they almost killed him. Why? Because, to them, Brock was nothing more than a racial freak." Releasing his grip on the young man, Karl walked back over to Jeff, facing him squarely again. "So much for racial harmony . . ."

Jeff offered no rebuttal, knowing none was possible.

"Like so many others before her," Karl went on, "Brock's mother finally reached an emotional breaking point. She came to realize the painful truth that racial prejudice never really ended. Oh yes—it's changed its face all right—but not its essence. A hundred years ago it was white against black. Now, it's Skintone 5s against Skintone 3s against Skintone 8s against Skintone 1s, all trapped together inside World Gov's global madhouse of 'racial harmony.'" Karl smiled, but there was no trace of humor in it. "It's the world that World Gov built, Jeff. The world they built upon the grave of every white man, woman, and child they had to destroy in order to achieve it."

Jeff turned away.

For the span of a long moment he could not bear the sight of young Brock's freshly remembered pain, brought back to hideous life by Karl Ramstrom's eloquently spoken words. It was because of what he glimpsed in the blond youth's eyes that he suddenly recalled his own pain of rejection as a youth, during those hurtful years when he too had fought for acceptance in a world of brown-skinned humanity.

And—in that same instant of remembered pain—Jeff recalled the tragic look in his own mother's blue eyes each time she desperately tried to soothe his hurt feelings after yet another hateful encounter with his racially-blended schoolmates. Each time, his mother had tried her best to make him believe that all the brown-skinned boys and girls who taunted him relentlessly “really didn't mean it.” Yet, her efforts had all been in vain . . . For, even back then, Jeff knew his childhood tormentors had indeed “meant it”—and meant it with all the possible hurt one child could inflict upon another.

Oh, Adam!

Your dad always understood your pain!

Deep down, he always understood!

Jeff slowly turned around and faced Karl again, an angry mist of tears in his eyes. “None of it matters now, Karl. Do you hear me? I buried my pain deep inside me years ago. And those kids that beat up Brock and tormented the rest of us because of the way we look were right—we are freaks. Like it or not that's exactly what you and I and the rest of your followers truly are. We're just a collection of racial misfits who barely manage to get along in life, if at all. That's our unhappy fate. And nothing that you or Nayra or I can ever do will ever change that.” He glanced hard at Brock, as if back through time to the troubled youth he once was. “So live with it.”

Karl laughed in such a hearty, carefree manner that the sound of it was like a sudden burst of sunlight in the dimly lit room. “Jeff . . . Jeff . . . you've hurt so much for so long you don't even know what it's like to live without shame and fear and unhappiness. All your life you've lived that way without ever really questioning the reason why.”

“I know the reason why, Karl. And so do you. But none of it matters anymore.”

“Doesn't it?”

“Nothing matters! Nothing at all but trying to get along in the world we live in the best we can.”

“Is that what the political mandarins of World Gov have come to make you believe and accept?”



"It doesn't matter what I believe or accept! Because in the broader view of things, our trivial unhappiness means absolutely nothing to World Gov. Nor should it." Jeff took a step forward, his eyes flaring with anger. "Your whole plan is suicidal. Don't you see that? Even if you reach Mars, what makes you think Avalon Colony still exists?"

"What makes you think it doesn't?"

"According to World Gov, Avalon died out years ago. A plague or something. Maybe this time they're telling the truth."

Karl nodded thoughtfully over that. "Maybe. And maybe the moon is made out of green cheese. Then again, maybe it isn't. And maybe World Gov is lying about Avalon. After all, if you ruled the world, would you want anyone like us knowing the truth—that a sanctuary still exists out on Mars for those who can reach it?"

Jeff turned away, his voice bitter. "Stealing a solarship, even if you can pilot it, will never work. You'll be shot down by Wopo before you reach the stratosphere. And all for what? Some hopeless dream that never had any chance of succeeding."

Karl seemed undisturbed by any of Jeff's concerns. "You've lived too long in fear, my friend. And that's exactly how World Gov wants the last of our kind to live—in fear. They never want you to realize, not for an instant, that it might be possible to outwit even something as huge and monolithic as they. But if you can, Jeff, try to believe for a moment that it's possible. Try to accept the fact that a few of us want freedom so badly that we can—and will—succeed."

"You can't succeed, Karl. Even if you and Nayra somehow manage to take control of a solarship, you'll be intercepted by Wopo and blown to pieces."

"A risk we're perfectly willing to take," Karl countered. "After all, what alternatives do we have? If we surrender, we all face the death penalty. If we're captured, that too remains our fate. If we should return to our former lives, that means a return to a society that despises our kind. So, do you honestly believe those three alternatives are preferable to death at the edge of space, should it come down to that?"

Jeff walked away for a moment, shaking his head in confusion and pain. "I don't know what to believe anymore . . ."

Karl looked after him, then came over and gently clasped his shoulder, "Listen to me, Jeff. It's time to wake up and finally see what the rest of this planet did to our people long ago. You're a skoolplex teacher, after all. You, more than most, know that World Gov history is nothing more than a cleverly fabricated lie. A lie used every day to brainwash our children into believing that humanity willingly united under the banner of 'cultural diversity' without one drop of blood being shed."

“I’ve come to accept it.”

“But some of us haven’t, Jeff. And never will. And even if the original intent of cultural diversity had been a good thing, which I doubt, why do you suppose there is no such thing as ‘cultural diversity’ left in the world? Why? Where is this so-called ‘cultural diversity’ that World Gov leaders so rapturously speak of on every anniversary of Unification? Tell me, Jeff. What other culture exists on this Earth anymore except the ‘culture’ dictated to the masses from inside the halls of World Gov? So wake up. Wake up and realize the truth. Accept the fact that you and I are the last survivors of a genocidal war.”

Jeff whirled around. “Shut up! I don’t want to hear another word! Do you hear me! You’re a threat! All of you! We have everything any sane human being could ever want. Food, shelter, a guaranteed place in society, freedom from centuries of war . . . racial unity.”

“But not the most important thing of all.”

“And what is that? Tell me, for Allah’s sake!”

Two hard green eyes focused on Jeff. “The truth.”

Jeff grew silent as Karl circled around and came face to face with him once more. “Your son told me a lot about you, Jeff. How you’ve been a dedicated skoolplex teacher all your life. How you’ve always sought out the truth of things no matter where it might lead. Such as risking your life as a youth to explore the ruins of Kooroora Space Port, for instance. So, I’m asking you now: Look for the truth. Open your eyes and look around you. Ask yourself if the world we live in today is truly better than the one World Gov destroyed in the aftermath of the Unification. Ask yourself if mixing up humanity into one homogeneous, brown-faced goo of ‘racial harmony’ was worth it if the price of that harmony meant the total sacrifice of historical truth, freedom, and scientific progress.”

“Maybe it was worth it!” Jeff blurted. “Maybe every goddamn twisted lie of it was worth it if it ended war and poverty and race-hatred. So what if we all now look and act and think the same! Why shouldn’t it be so! All our differences ever did was incite envy and hatred. So forget trying to convince me that the way of World Gov isn’t the better way!”

Slowly, Karl backed away.

“Very well, Jeff. I’ll make no further effort to convince you. Once we reach our objective, I’ll let you go. Afterwards, you can tell Wopo you were kidnapped by Nayra terrorists and managed to escape. Who knows? They might even award you a Good Citizen medal.” Then, turning towards his two men, Karl said, “Secure him. Then take

him down to the factory floor. We move out in ten minutes.”



# Nine

*"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."*

— Robert Frost

Five minutes later Jeff was brought down to the factory floor, his wrists bound behind his back by a pair of transparent plektite handcuffs. Once there, he immediately noticed several dozen other men and women gathered around—all dressed in the black uniform of Wopo!

As he was ushered forward, Karl, now himself attired in the same lethal black uniform of a World Police officer, came cheerfully up to him. "That's right, Jeff. Now you see why I have such confidence in our escape plan. When we arrive at Johannesburg Space Port twenty minutes from now, it won't be as the wild-eyed terrorists that you suspected. On the contrary, we're going in as a disciplined, well-armed contingent of Wopo officers assigned to 'secure the area' from a possible terrorist attack."

Jeff had never seen such boundless confidence before, so utterly free of restraint, so awesome in its certainty. Yes, Karl Ramstrom was fortunate indeed to have escaped long-term commitment behind the four walls of a Behavioral Modification Facility. Perhaps his sharp intelligence had aided him in avoiding that fate. Whatever the case, that same intelligence was now focused like the burning rays of a magnifying glass against World Gov in a desperate attempt to gain a dubious freedom for himself and his followers.

"What about my son?" Jeff asked, searching the factory floor for any sight of Adam.

Karl motioned gaily towards one particular youth, standing tall amid a group of other Wopo-uniformed comrades. "There he is, Jeff. That proud one standing right over there. Three months ago, when Adam first came to me, he was weak and scared and uncertain about who or what he was. Now look at him."

Jeff looked.

It was true. He hardly recognized his son. He was no longer a boy now—but a man. And he seemed, even at this distance, to be more confident, more happy, and more at ease with himself than Jeff had ever known him to be. Here—standing amid all these renegade white faces.

As if reading Jeff's thoughts, Karl remarked, "He's among his own kind now. Among his own people. And look at the change in him. No longer is he ashamed of having blue eyes or fair skin. And he's found a caring woman of his own race who loves him for what he is. If that is called evil, then I suggest you reconsider the nature of those who claim it to be. Ask yourself what those who now hold power over you, I, and your son have gained by implementing the systematic intermixing of the white race with all the rest of humanity."

Total world domination . . . Jeff suddenly thought. Yet, he dare not say it, knowing it would give Karl further reason to justify his actions.

"Does my son know I'm here?"

Karl nodded. "Of course. He's known since the moment one of our sentries spotted you entering the building."

Jeff flicked his eyes to the reddish-haired man, surprise evident in them.

"Yes, I'm afraid so, Jeff. Stealthy and clever as you attempted to be, you had no chance of getting the drop on us. We had motion sensors and other devices in place to detect any unwanted human entry."

"If my son knows I'm here, why hasn't he acknowledged it?"

Karl dropped his green eyes for a moment, then looked up again. "Your son does not wish to speak with you."

"I see . . ."

"Adam knows why you came here—to take him back. But, as you can see, he is totally committed to this mission." Karl waved an arm at the gathering. "As is everyone else here."

Glancing around again, Jeff had no doubt of that. Grudgingly, he had to admire any man capable of molding a group of emotionally-injured youths into such a disciplined, organized fighting force—no matter what his motives were. It was obvious that Karl Ramstrom was a skilled and charismatic leader of men.

At that moment, a serious-minded woman with long auburn hair came up and halted in front of Karl. Jeff estimated her age at around thirty, somewhat older than the average Nayra recruit.

"All team leaders report ready, Karl."

"Affirmative," Karl replied. "Let's begin loading the airkroozers."

Jeff glanced sharply at Karl as the woman turned on her heel and left.

“What did you think, Jeff? That we intended to march all the way to Johannesburg Space Port dressed in full Wopo uniform?” He laughed good-naturedly, gently slapping the skoolplex administrator on the back. “God, but you’re a fascinatingly grim man. But, given time, I’m certain I could change that.”

As Jeff watched, a huge hangar door at one end of the abandoned factory began to grind open, revealing six fully-armed Wopo airkroozers.

“How did you possibly—”

“Oh, it wasn’t easy. But when you’re as determined to win your freedom from World Gov as we are, you’ll do anything necessary. In the case of the airkroozers, three of them were hijacked, two were abandoned as wrecks during last summer’s Multicultural Day uprising that we managed to haul off and repair, and one we put together from hundreds of spare parts we salvaged from a nearby government wrecking yard.”

“Where did you get the know-how to do all this?”

Karl gestured at a dark-haired individual in the distance, now directing the first Nayra teams onto the waiting airkroozers, “From that man over there. Rudolf Marten’s his name. He’s a former lieutenant in the World Police.”

“You mean to say you have a Wopo officer in your group?”

“A former Wopo officer, Jeff. Now Marten’s a defector with a price on his head. In fact, he’s the most wanted man in the world right this minute. Wopo has standing orders from the highest levels of World Gov to shoot him on sight if they ever cross his path.”

“But I’ve never heard of any Wopo officer going bad,” Jeff said, astonished. “Not even once.”

“Of course you haven’t. Those who do go bad rarely survive long, for one thing. Wopo hunts them down like rats and exterminates them without mercy. That alone keeps most of them in line. But Marten was one of the rare ones to get away.”

“What made him defect?”

“Last year, his Wopo unit was ordered to use lethal Xylexx gas against two thousand factoryplex workers after they went on strike. It seems World Gov had cut their food rations in half in order to help feed famine victims over in Lesotho Sector 4. Anyway, what Marten didn’t know at the time was that his own sister had recently been transferred to that factoryplex. As a result, she died during the gassing. Since then, Marten’s never forgiven himself. After he defected, he joined up with me.”

“I see.”

“He seldom talks to anyone, by the way,” Karl went on, “even to other Nayra

members. And he's extremely dangerous, by what I've learned. Even I fear him at times. Yet, without his knowledge we never could have captured or repaired any of the airkroozers now in our possession."

"I never realized Wopo was vulnerable to attack," Jeff murmured, shifting his glance away from Rudolf Marten and back to Karl.

"It's vulnerable all right. But the average, obedient citizen is never permitted to know that. And why should he know it? Especially when he's too busy wondering where his next Nomo-Hunga tablet is coming from."

"When were the airkroozers captured?"

"About eight months ago. I sent Marten and four others to raid a remote Wopo outpost about fifty kilometers east of here. At the time, it was guarded by a small unit, no more than ten men. And though our raid proved successful, it was never mentioned in any World Gov news report. So I'm certain you've never heard about it."

"Not a word," Jeff admitted.

"Not surprising. World Gov never reports any terrorist attacks against it. That is, not if they come out the loser."

Jeff remained silent in the aftermath of Karl's revelations, yet his respect for the renegade Nayra leader was nakedly evident on his face. For it was now clear that Karl Ramstrom's escape plan was not the mad scheme of a desperate fanatic—but a coldly calculated, thoroughly plotted, precision-executed operation that had a frightening chance of succeeding.

"Well, it's time to be off, Jeff. The last airkroozer is loading."

With a snap of his hand, Karl motioned Jeff's two captors to usher him forward. As they moved in the direction of the waiting airkroozers, Jeff heard the sound of hoverjets whining up to full lift-off power. In that last moment, before he was pushed aboard the lead airkroozer, he realized then there could be no turning back for Karl or his followers. For this handsome, charismatic, supremely confident individual had totally committed himself to the dangerous dream of reaching the distant sanctuary of Mars.

But whether or not he would gain that dream, whether or not he would wrench his freedom from the collective grasp of nineteen billion clamoring human beings would be decided—one way or the other—within the hour.

And Jeff Huxton, willingly or not, would be witness to it all.

Johannesburg roasted beneath a blazing African sun as six heavily armed Wopo airkroozers streaked towards the sweltering outskirts of the city. Teeming with twenty-seven million human beings forever poised on the knife edge of famine, it spread



outward across the sunburnt veldt like a leprous concrete tumor.

Welling up from this dark cesspool of humanity came the occasional cry for freedom, whenever the sheer madness of it all finally drove some lone individual amok, screaming out in the holy name of God and Allah for deliverance from it all. But the only deliverance left in such a dangerously overpopulated city like Johannesburg was but the deliverance of death, Jeff knew, gazing down at the heat-blasted nightmare from where he sat, handcuffed, in his seat. And even that dubious freedom might have to come from inside the tight steel chamber of a government euth-chamber in the end, he realized. And come at the order of men like Ahmad Yehudit, who would bless even as they killed.

“For this is the way, the way of the world . . .”

Yes, Jeff thought. The way of the world.

And the children who sang so sweetly, so innocently, of this world knew as well as he did that there had been no other way than this. That this—this teeming altar of racially-entwined humanity must now be worshipped upon forever and forever and forever so that mankind might be spared the blasphemy of race hatred and economic envy and religious prejudice for all time to come.

The way of the world, his mind echoed again . . .

A world where the nations of white men had been systematically sacrificed in the holy name of that long-failed dream.

The world he bowed down to.

But not Karl.

No, not him . . .

Jeff looked away from the window and the polluted sprawl below. Somewhere in the smog-stained distance ahead he glimpsed the first metallic towers of Johannesburg Space Port. Hidden in that decaying, tangled complex of steel and glass stood a hundred singular machines, each capable of breaking the bonds of Earth and sending one deep into the weightless freedom of space.

Yet, none of the solarships had flown for decades, Jeff knew. Not since the knowledge and the skill to do so had been gradually lost to World Gov and the racially-diluted humanity it had brought into being. Even so, the proud and mighty ships yet remained, towering monuments to the Euro-ethnic civilization which had long ago designed, built, and flown them to the distant Martian colonies . . .

And now Karl wanted one of them.

Just one . . .

It seemed like such an insignificant request, on the surface. After all, why not let one man and a small band of his followers escape if they were so utterly discontented with their lives?

But Jeff knew why, glancing once again at the cancerous city below. Man had united, willingly or not, in a common fate. Shackled by that common fate, all must now live or perish by it under the implacable scrutiny of World Gov. All must suffer, all must die, if need be.

But none, in the end, must escape.

That would be World Gov's answer to someone like Karl—that no man shall escape the fate of his brothers. That no man shall be permitted refuge amid some peaceful glade far across the black meadows of space.

So World Gov would stop him.

Despite his careful planning, despite his determination, despite everything—Jeff knew Karl Ramstrom would be stopped. Knowing that, he realized too how little time he had left to save his son. Flexing his wrists, he cautiously tested the strength of the plektite handcuffs he already knew to be implacable. No, he would never gain his freedom that way.

But if . . .

If he should suddenly agree to join Karl—

Twisting in his seat, Jeff looked over at the leader of Nayra. He sat in the command chair of the airkroozer, his deep-set green eyes flicking back and forth between clusters of data screens and the vista ahead as every micron of their final approach to Johannesburg Space Port was monitored by him.

"I think you're going to make it after all, Karl."

Karl, his eyes remaining fixed on the space port ahead, calmly responded to the voice behind him, "What made you change your mind?"

"I don't know. Maybe the fact that you've gotten this far without being shot down."

"Are you surprised? No one seeing this formation of Wopo airkroozers would suspect them to be anything else but what they appear to be."

"True. Unless someone in your group betrayed you. Unless World Gov knows exactly what your plans are. That was my biggest fear—that you were flying straight into a trap."

"And now?"

Jeff glanced out the window towards the space port ahead. "Now . . . I think you just might get away with it."

For the first time, Karl took his eyes away from the view ahead and glanced back at Jeff. "Are you finally coming out of it, Jeff?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you finally shaking the belief that there's no hope for our kind? That World Gov is invincible? That a handful of determined people like us can't win?"

"Maybe I believed that—at first."

Karl looked ahead again as he made a slight course correction. Jeff felt the aircraft bank gently to the left, then proceed towards the southwestern section of the space port. In that same instant he felt his stomach knot up, knowing that Karl would soon have them all at their target.

"Tell me, Jeff . . . do you love your wife?"

At first, Jeff was caught off guard by the strange question. Then the reason behind it slowly dawned on him.

"Lately we've grown apart," Jeff admitted.

Karl nodded slightly on hearing that, as if he were examining a mathematical equation being scribbled across an invisible chalkboard in front of him.

"I just wondered."

"It would be painful, however," Jeff carefully went on, "if I never saw my daughter Puja again."

"Yes, I quite understand. In fact, you strike me as a man very devoted to his children. Your presence here is proof of that." There was a further moment of silence between the two men, then Karl murmured distantly, "Daughters do grow up, however. And when they do, they all too often move away to some remote part of the world, following the will of their husbands."

"I've considered that."

Karl initiated another course correction, bringing the airkroozer straight into line with a vast landing field littered with abandoned ground-support vehicles and several dozen globe-shaped spacecraft, each emblazoned with the World Gov emblem of a brown fist encircled by laurel leaves. The emblems had been added long after the ships had fallen into disuse, however, painted across their rust-streaked surfaces in a feeble attempt by World Gov to deceive the public about its "technological progress."

"And your son—what about him?"

"I don't wish to lose him either."

"You don't have to lose him, Jeff. Not if you come with us."

Jeff breathed an inward sigh of relief. Without much effort, he had successfully maneuvered Karl into his trap. Now, only a single pair of plektite handcuffs stood between him and his son's freedom.

He hoped.

"My son would never want me along. It's pretty clear he's turned against me."

"You're wrong about that. Your son still loves you. He just refuses to accept anyone who continues to aid and abet the cause of World Gov."

"And if I should stop aiding and abetting it?"

"You need only demonstrate that," Karl replied, "by joining us."

Jeff nodded, then sank into deep quiet again, as if in thoughtful reflection. After a calculated moment of feigned indecision he glanced up again, a purposeful look in his eye.

"Alright. Count me in."

There.

He had said it.

He only hoped it had come out sounding convincing enough.

Karl looked over his shoulder again, once more calculating on the mental chalkboard of his mind the equation of Jeff's answer. Seemingly satisfied, he flicked a commanding glance at one of his men. "Release him."

Freed of his restraints, Jeff tensed in his seat as Karl banked the formation of Wopo airkroozers decisively towards the hulking shape of the nearest solarship, one of the few left on the landing field that still looked capable of flight.

This was it, he thought.

The final approach to Johannesburg Space Port.

Below, Jeff glimpsed several space port security personnel moving like gray ants against the blast-stained concrete as they lowered towards it, their hand-shielded eyes upturned to the sky. Four seconds later six black airkroozers bearing the official seal of Wopo thudded down onto the hot tarmac in a menacing semi-circle beside the looming solarship.

Rising from his command seat, Karl looked around at Jeff as he took a plasma gun from a wall mount and shoved it hard into a black holster strapped just beneath his

armpit. "This is it, Jeff. Freedom. For you. For your son. For all of us. And it lies just sixty meters away across that sun-baked tarmac."

A collective murmur of optimism rippled through the airkroozer as Karl's people made a final check of their weapons and equipment. As they did, Karl came up to Jeff. "The plan is this: we march our entire force straight towards the ship and immediately surround it. Completely overwhelm the security and ground crew by a sheer show of force. You, I, and Marten will head up the approach. Since I'm wearing the insignia of a Wopo Major I should command the immediate respect of everyone present. Space port personnel are used to surprise inspections like this, so they shouldn't suspect anything."

"Where do I fit in?"

Karl let go a devilish grin. "Why, you're the Nayra terrorist we've just captured. And as commander of this Wopo unit I have it on good word that a whole team of your terrorist comrades have just infiltrated this facility. That's why I've been ordered to immediately occupy this solarship with three squads of crack Wopo officers." He flicked a glance out the cockpit window. "Think they'll buy it?"

Jeff doubted they would, glancing aft at the collection of white faces.

Yet, even as he watched, Karl's people began spraying their faces with a special aerosol colorant. Within a few seconds their faces were as brown and indistinguishable in appearance as that of the average racially-blended citizen. To further enhance their camouflage, the half dozen or so blue-eyed and green-eyed individuals among this particular team began inserting brown contact lenses over their offending eye color. The rest, already naturally brown-eyed, were busy aiding them. It all added up to a brilliant display of precision teamwork, Jeff noted, demonstrating once again Karl Ramstrom's stunning foresight and planning.

When Jeff turned to face the leader of Nayra once more, he too was so disguised with skin colorant and brown contacts, all set off by a very amused grin.

"Well Jeff, any remaining doubts about my plan?" Karl queried, as he stuffed the final strands of his reddish-gray hair beneath the edges of a peaked Wopo cap.

Staring back at the brown-eyed, dark-complexioned man now facing him, Jeff was left speechless. The entire "racial transformation" of every individual onboard had taken less than a minute. And there was no doubt that an identical transformation had just taken place onboard the remaining airkroozers as well.

"None," Jeff finally managed to mutter.

"Good," Karl said. Turning, he motioned Rudolf Marten forward. "You know the plan, Marten. However, instead of Brock, we'll now use Jeff as our bait. Okay, let's do it."

Marten withdrew his plasma gun and jabbed it hard into Jeff's back. "Just to make it believable," he said. "No offense."

Shoved down the center of the airkroozer and out the hatchway a moment later, Jeff found himself standing on the sun-blazed tarmac beneath a glaring African sky. Glancing around, he was immediately struck by the blast-furnace heat, the acrid smell of sun-baked concrete, and the cold trickle of sweat down the middle of his back. Marten, on the other hand, seemed completely oblivious to it all as he pushed and prodded Jeff towards the looming solarship ahead.

Karl walked slightly ahead of them, flanked on both sides by the advancing phalanx of his "Wopo" force. Holding his capped head high, he led forth his impressive procession with arrogant superiority, expertly mimicking the slightly disdainful, officious demeanor so common among high-ranking Wopo officers.

A moment later Karl's entire force, along with Rudolf Marten and Jeff, came to an abrupt halt in front of four bewildered space port security personnel.

Nearby, a dozen or so curious ground crew looked on, fearful-eyed in the presence of so many heavily-armed Wopo officers. The whole operation was having its intended effect, Jeff could see, trying his best to keep his wits about him. Yet, as the minutes ticked by, it became less and less likely that he would be able to extricate his son from the relentless machinery of Karl's plan.

And minutes were all he had left.



*"Never trust a government that doesn't trust its own citizens with guns."*

*— Thomas Jefferson*

"I am Major Ozuma Lopez, gentlemen," Karl Ramstrom said in the clipped manner of a very bored but very punctilious government official forced to carry out a nettlesome duty. "Who, may I ask, is in charge here?"

One of the four security personnel stepped uncertainly forward. "I guess that would be me, Major. Is there anything wrong . . . ?"

"Your rank and name?"

"Sergeant Gbandi Ngumi, sir. Space port Security."

"Very well, Sergeant. I will have to deal with you since there is obviously no one else present of higher rank and authority."

"Yes sir."

"This man," Karl gestured with a disdainful flick of his wrist at Jeff, "is a terrorist infiltrator my Wopo unit just intercepted outside Gate 146. After questioning him, we've learned he's the point man for a much larger terrorist force on its way to attack this facility."

"I don't know nothing about that, sir . . ." the sergeant replied, hesitation in his voice. He raised his wrist-communicator. "Maybe I should contact the Chief of Security and—"

Karl's hand snapped out like a black mamba, seizing the sergeant's upraised wrist.

"I'm afraid there's no time for that, sergeant. Every second we delay in securing the immediate area could cost us lives and government property—" He nodded towards the nearby ground crew, his glance now leveled suspiciously in their direction. "—and threaten our own lives as well . . ."

Following Karl's suspicious glance, the sergeant studied the milling crowd of maintenance personnel. "You mean—?"

"Precisely, sergeant. These vicious terrorists have established saboteurs throughout



this base. It's all part of a mass plot to destroy Johannesburg Space Port as a political blow against African Achievement Day and World Gov."

The sergeant muttered fearfully until Karl brought him into focus again.

"How many ground crew are in the area?"

The sergeant took some time to think, then mumbled, "Maybe fifteen . . ."

"And security personnel?"

"Just we four, sir. But more," he nodded at a concrete blockhouse a quarter of a kilometer away, "are posted there."

Karl flicked a glance in the direction of the blockhouse. A well-placed airkroozier rocket would take it out of action, if need be. His main concern, however, was the possible arrival of genuine Wopo forces before his people had time to ready the solarship for launch.

"Very well, sergeant," Karl snapped in the commanding voice of one who has grown impatient with the situation. "Order all ground crew to report immediately to me."

"But I—"

"Now!"

Sergeant Ngumi whirled and barked several times in the direction of the ground crew. As they began to come forward, Jeff noticed several others, heretofore unseen, emerge from the hold of the solarship. Joining up with their fellow workers, they all knotted together under the now suspicious eye of Sergeant Ngumi and his three armed subordinates.

"Is that all of them, sergeant?"

"I think so . . ."

Karl nodded thoughtfully, then calmly withdrew his plasma gun. "Splendid. Now, if you would be so kind, please do as I say and drop your weapon. The same goes for your men."

Sergeant Ngumi's jaw quivered as he nervously reached a hand towards the butt of his plasma gun. Completely demoralized, he dropped it to the tarmac, followed by three other weapons held by his subordinates.

Several of Karl's people quickly rushed forward and snatched them up.

"So far so good, eh Jeff?" Karl quipped, glancing roguishly at him. Then he flicked his attention over to Rudolf Marten. "Have Team 2 move these prisoners back to the airkroozers and secured. Hurry. Then start boarding the ship. We haven't a second to

spare.”

Taking the muzzle of his plasma gun from Jeff’s back, Marten turned around and began snapping orders in a harsh voice. Within seconds, Team 2 had coordinated the removal of the prisoners back to the airkroozers, bound them with plektite handcuffs, then returned with several containers of supplies to be loaded aboard the solarship.

As the ship began boarding with Karl’s people, Jeff spotted his son directing them through a hatchway, his voice surprisingly crisp and commanding. For an instant his heart ached, knowing that only a few minutes more lay between Adam and the black depths of space. Unless he acted, he would lose his son forever. Yet, here he stood, trapped inside this diabolically clever escape plan that Karl Ramstrom had so skillfully crafted, unable to move.

“Any sign of trouble?” Karl asked, as Marten came up to him a moment later.

“All clear.”

“Good.”

Jeff glanced into the distance. Wave after wave of shimmering heat roiled up from the sunburnt tarmac, the only sign of movement on the horizon. All else was still. Yet, it was here, at high noon in the middle of 22nd century Africa, that forty desperate Caucasians fought to escape from nineteen billion swarming brown faces.

For a moment, the pathetic sadness of it all struck Jeff deeply. It was as if he stood there witnessing the ancient struggle of a dying mastodon, fighting to free itself from a tar pit it was fast sinking into; and yet, even if it could free itself, so many, many of its kind were already gone, lost to a past that would never live again.

So it was with Karl Ramstrom.

For he too was a mastodon, struggling to break free of the racial tar pit his kind had long ago sunk into. And though he might reach up for the stars, hoping to grab hold of one and yank himself free, what possible future lay out there even if he could?

Jeff could only wonder . . .

A moment later Karl caught him staring into the distance and brought him back to the present with the soft sound of his voice, “It isn’t your world anymore, Jeff. World Gov and nineteen billion brown faces took it from you long ago. Now you have no other choice but to leave it behind and find another one.”

Jeff shifted his eyes away from the shimmering distance and back to Karl Ramstrom. “Will Mars be any better than this one? I can’t help but doubt it, Karl. Because no matter how much we despise World Gov, we can’t deny one thing: it ended war on this planet for good. It brought food and shelter to all. It gave us a united world

and a common goal.”

Karl’s face hardened. “What common goal? Blind, unquestioning obedience? A world where truth was murdered for the price of a Nomo-Hunga tablet? Is that what you still defend, Jeff?”

Jeff had no time to reply, for Rudolf Marten came rushing up at that moment.

“Everyone onboard ship, Karl.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

As the three men moved quickly towards the waiting space vessel, Jeff raced through his mind for any last-second way to stop Karl’s plan and free his son. Though Nayra had gotten this far, he had little doubt that World Gov forces would intercept and destroy their vessel long before they even reached escape velocity. All of them would die –and for nothing.

Just as they neared the ship, a young woman stumbled out of the hatchway and shrieked, “Go back, Karl! It’s a trap!” Then she collapsed on the scorched tarmac and lay still.

In that same instant, Rudolf Marten whipped out his plasma gun, leveling it on Karl and Jeff. “Freeze, you two! It’s all over! Your whole plan!” He grinned at their shocked faces. “In a few minutes this entire area will be swarming with Wopo.”

Karl made a move towards his holstered weapon until Marten barked: “Don’t make me burn you down, Ramstrom, much as I’d like to! Orders from World Gov, you understand. They told me they wanted you alive. And I intend to keep my bargain with them.”

Jeff felt a hot current of hate arc between the two men, even as Marten went on, “You see, you’ve got a lot of interrogation to undergo. And then a lot of long years after that rotting away inside a mentalplex before you finally get to die. Same for the rest of your traitorous bunch inside the ship. And just in case you’re wondering, they’ve all been knocked cold with sleep gas.” He chuckled. “I purposely neglected to tell you that every ship in World Gov’s fleet had sleep gas canisters recently installed to prevent hijacking by terrorist lunatics like you.” He jerked the barrel of his weapon aggressively in Karl’s direction. “Now drop your weapon nice and slow.”

“Do as he says, Karl!” Jeff warned, alarmed by the sudden clenching of Karl’s fist on the butt of his plasma gun. “Otherwise he’ll kill us both!”

Reluctantly, Karl pulled his weapon free and let it drop. It fell to the hot tarmac with a hard clatter of finality.

“That’s much better,” Marten grinned. “You see, I get a bigger bonus if I bring you

in alive.” He took a quick step forward and kicked the plasma gun aside.

“Why did you betray us?”

“A fair question,” Marten replied, smirking coldly. “Maybe the last one I or anyone else will ever bother answering for you. Okay, I’ll tell you. Over the long hot months I got to thinking about your plan while we tinkered away inside that musty old factory. I kept asking myself over and over again what chance any of us really had of ever getting away. I mean, how in Buddha’s name could any sane man possibly believe he could outwit the combined power of World Gov and Wopo—and reach Mars. And you know what, Ramstrom? One day I convinced myself it just couldn’t be done.”

“So that’s it. You weaseled your way back into the Wopo rat pack—just to save your skin.”

“Pretty much so.”

Karl lunged.

It happened with such ferocity that Jeff never saw him actually move—only the aftermath of his savage collision with Marten. The ex-Wopo officer yelped as first one blow, then another, sent his weapon cartwheeling from his grasp. A third blow buckled his legs and he sank to the tarmac, as if kneeling in prayer before the red-haired man looming over him.

In that same instant, a sharp glint of sunlight caught the corner of Jeff’s eye. Turning, he spied Karl’s discarded plasma gun lying not three meters away. Realizing it was his last chance to save himself and free his son, he threw caution to the four gods and leapt. Hitting the scorched tarmac with the palms of his hands, he rolled over and snatched out for the weapon.

Got it!

Spinning around, he was just in time to see Karl deal a final blow to Rudolf Marten’s upraised throat, killing the ex-Wopo officer instantly.

“It’s all over, Karl!” Jeff snapped, getting back to his feet as he leveled the barrel of the plasma gun on his adversary. “Good try but you lost!”

Karl Ramstrom turned and faced him.

“I know now just how dangerous you really are,” Jeff went on, his blue eyes narrowed against the glare of the sun. “Because any man who fights and kills like that is far more than he appears to be. Who are you—really?”

Karl remained silent for a long moment, as if calculating the distance between himself and his newly armed opponent. Then he said, “Alright, Jeff. It looks like you win.

I'm not what I appear to be. I'm not even what my followers believe me to be—a factory worker."

"Then who are you?"

"I'm a professor of physics at the University of Avalon—on Mars."

"You mean—"

"That's right. I'm not a native Terran at all, though I do a fairly good imitation of one, wouldn't you say?"

Jeff tightened his grip on the plasma gun. "That explains a great deal then. Why no one, including my own son, ever knew much about you—or where you came from." He glanced at the dead body lying on the tarmac. "But it doesn't explain how you took care of Marten so effectively. Only a specially trained killer could have done that."

"Specially trained for a reason. My mission here on Earth required it."

"And what is your mission here on Earth—to destroy our peaceful society?"

"No, Jeff. My mission is to repatriate our people. People of our own flesh and blood who got stranded in this racial quagmire long ago. We of Avalon came to redeem you, to bring you back to Mars."

"Then why the secrecy about your true origin—even among your own followers?"

"It was necessary. You see, part of my mission was to seek out and locate a Terran physicist by the name of Dr. Vladimir Zaslov. Therefore, I couldn't risk my true identity or purpose becoming known, not even to my own followers." He glanced down at the body of Marten. "For obvious reasons."

"Why is this Dr. Zaslov so important?"

"He has scientific data we of Avalon are in need of. So, I was sent here in a one-man spacecraft nine months ago to locate and persuade him to return with me." Karl looked regretfully into the distance. "However, that part of my mission was not successful."

"Nor this part," Jeff returned, motioning towards the solarship. "Now I want my son back. Give him to me and you can go. But hurry—because that's the only deal you're going to get."

Karl nodded. "If that's what you really want, Jeff. I'll return him to you. But I'll need a gas mask to enter the ship in order to retrieve him. There's some onboard the airkroozers."

Three minutes later, and now wearing gas masks, both men entered the solarship. Jeff went along as a safety precaution, just to make certain Karl didn't attempt a last minute escape with his son.

Finding Adam unconscious on Deck 1, the two men dragged him outside onto the tarmac, laying him in the shadow of the looming space vessel.

“There,” Karl said. “You have what you came for. Your son. Now that he’s starting to come around heed this advice: take him back to one of the airkroozers and change him back into civilian clothing as quickly as possible. There’s some onboard. Then run. As fast as you can. Run towards the nearest Security Post. When you reach it, tell the guards on duty that you and your son were abducted by Nayra terrorists and that you managed to overpower your captors and escape. Do it. But hurry. You have less than five minutes before I lift off.”

Jeff nodded.

“One other thing: if ever you should regret your decision, seek out another Nayra cell and join up with them. There are several more operating here on Earth. Within a year, a ship from Mars will be sent back to pick them up. It will be the last one, by the way. After that, Mars will cease all contact with Earth—forever.” Karl reached out a hand in farewell. “So long, Jeff. I won’t forget you. You’ve proven yourself quite a brave man. Stubborn, but braver than any man I’ve ever known.”

Before Jeff could utter another word, Karl released his hand and abruptly turned away, disappearing into the massive ship. A moment later the hatch hummed closed. By that time, Jeff was dragging Adam towards the cluster of airkroozers. Reaching the nearest one a minute later, he jumped aboard and found his son a change of clothing. Stripping off Adam’s Wopo uniform, he quickly redressed his son and got him to his feet. Still groggy, but now able to stand, Jeff spoke urgently to him, “Listen to me son! Listen very carefully! We’re in trouble and we’ve got to run!”

Adam half-nodded, still dazed by the effects of the sleep gas.

“That’s my boy. You can do it.”

Awkwardly, they began trotting away from the cluster of airkroozers. Behind them, the massive spacecraft began to vibrate with immense power. Of course, Jeff thought. All the pieces fit now. Being a physicist, Karl Ramstrom would know how to operate such a complex vessel. He wondered what other skills and talents such a man as he possessed. But then, Jeff realized, he would never know the answer to that.

“Come on, Adam! That’s my boy! Keep running!”

“Dad . . .” Adam muttered. “What happened . . . ? Where are we . . . ?”

“No time to explain, son. Just do as I say and keep running!”

They ran.

And ran.

Gasping to a halt two minutes later, Jeff lifted his eyes and looked towards the burning horizon. Six, seven, eight black dots had suddenly appeared in the blazing yellow sky, headed their way. Wasp-like in shape, they were closing fast.

Wopo!

Jeff spun around towards the massive solarship, now a quarter of a kilometer away. Its cluster of powerful engines had become a deafening roar of barely-suppressed energies, as if the ship itself had suddenly assumed a conscious will of its own.

“Dad . . . the ship . . . it’s about to—” Adam started to say, finally shaking free the last effects of the sleep gas. Then, realization dawning, he suddenly broke free of his father’s grasp and began running back towards the roaring ship.

“Emerald!”

Jeff bolted after him, begging Vishnu for the strength to catch the younger, swifter man before he hopelessly outdistanced him.

“Adam, come back! Please, son! It’s too late! It’s too late!”

Something streaked past overhead just as Jeff seized Adam from behind and dragged him down to the hot tarmac in a crumpled, sobbing heap. Two more streaks shot past, silver-white blurs of pure speed.

Missiles!

Wopo was attempting to destroy the solarship!

Dear Christ in Heaven, forgive me! But I had no other choice, Karl! I couldn’t let you take my son!

A sudden burst of radiant white light blinded Jeff in the next instant, more dazzling than the sun. No, he thought, more dazzling than ten suns. More dazzling than anything he imagined possible.

The ship!

It was rising!

Into that blinding artificial dawn three Wopo missiles suddenly vanished and exploded, vaporizing six grounded airkroozers and the horrified prisoners within. A moment later the blast wave rolled over Jeff and his son, tumbling them backward across the tarmac.

Yet the ship kept rising!

Go Karl . . . Jeff silently cheered from inside the raging inferno of his mind.

And still the ship lifted, lifted, lifted!

Jeff bent back his head as the ship's fusion glare filled his eyes with terror and awe.

Go Karl!

Go!

Then, slowly sinking back, he huddled there beside his sobbing son, holding on to him for dear life. Joy and sorrow and so much else he would never know swept over him in that final moment, even as his vision faded black beneath Karl Ramstrom's burning torch of victory over World Gov.





# Eleven

*"It is not in the stars to hold our destiny, but in ourselves."*

— William Shakespeare

Five months after his encounter with Karl Ramstrom at Johannesburg Space Port, Jeff Huxton found himself quietly resettled into the routine of Skoolplex 619. World Gov had accepted his version of events that day, allowing him and his son to return to their former lives. Since then, Adam had gone off to Universityplex, only to be expelled after suffering a violent emotional breakdown. Shortly thereafter, his daughter Puja, now fifteen, opted to join the Junior Euth Corps. She was summarily sent to Asia Zone 66 for three years of training and field experience.

Saddened by her unexpected career choice, Jeff saw it as an end to his aspirations for her. Now she would never become a doctor, he realized. Instead of healing the sick, as he had hoped, she would instead devote her life to ending life—assigned to various famine zones—or FZs—around the planet. Forever on the move, forever chasing the specter of death, she would perform her duties for World Gov helping put terminally-starved citizens out of their misery.

"Dad," she had told him just before departing, "what better way to show my love and devotion for Chrislamhinbuddhism?"

Jeff, sorrow in his eyes, had no answer to give her other than fatherly silence and a parting embrace.

And so off Puja went, her lovely dark eyes glistening with that special fervor so peculiar to youth suddenly enamored of a noble cause. With a respectable skintone rating of 6.2 and a solid, if not spectacular grade average, she would go far, he felt certain. Perhaps one day she would rise to the level of Euth Commissioner, with the authority to personally sanction euthanasia programs on her own.

Yet, his daughter's newfound dedication to Chrislamhinbuddhism had caught him completely by surprise. One moment she seemed all girlish, giggly and carefree, scampering off to group sing-longs and camp-outs with the We Are One Blended Race League and then—almost overnight—becoming a totally different person from the one he had known. Suddenly prim and serious, she began speaking to him about the noble ideals of World Gov and how she had decided to join the Junior Euth Corps. "We've got a

better world to build, dad," she had told him. "I want to be a part of it."

Bless you, Puja.

Praise Allah, Christ, Buddha, and Vishnu.

If only your youthful fire and enthusiasm for life could somehow reignite Adam's own forsaken will to live, he had thought. Yet, he knew that miracle would never be, as he saw his daughter off to her new life in Asia before returning to his own at Skoolplex 619. There was so much to reflect upon, he felt: the passage of years, the sweet and the bitter of raising a family, the hopes and the failures.

Yes, the failures . . .

Three months earlier, his wife Li Ming had filed for divorce, citing sexual incompatibility. Her state-appointed legal counsel claimed she was being deprived of the state-mandated three orgasms per week, as prescribed by Sexual Satisfaction Code 3875690-F. In addition, she quoted a long list of other reasons why their marriage had failed, none of which had anything to do with her: "My husband needs help, Prime Counselor. He's so depressed most of the time he's become dysfunctional. He doesn't care about his job, his students, or anything else for that matter. Yes, I know he rescued our son from those Nayra terrorists just a few months ago. I know he almost lost his life doing so. But that doesn't give him the right to mope around the house all day making my life miserable . . ."

Based upon her testimony, the Prime Counselor granted Li Ming Huxton a Class 16 divorce, citing from Sexual Satisfaction Code 3875690-F, paragraph 5, ". . . that a woman's right to a minimum number of three orgasms per week shall not be abridged or denied pursuant to Women's Liberation Statute 422 and that, if such is so abridged or denied then said marriage, upon request of either party, shall forthwith be dissolved . . ."

Two months after their divorce became final, Li Ming married her church choir director. A week after that—she gave birth to their first child. They named him Ajani, meaning "he who wins the struggle." Li Ming sent Jeff a hologram of their new baby, proudly proclaiming his 5.3 skintone rating, very near the government ideal. Jeff somberly congratulated his former wife, and wished her well. Despite that, she accused him of being jealous of her new and happy life, even when he insisted he held no such jealousy. Turning on him savagely, Li Ming accused him of being envious of her new son because he had destroyed his own. "If you hadn't filled up his mind with all that nonsense about the 'great contributions' made by people who look like him," she shrieked, "he wouldn't be where he is now—locked up inside a mentalplex! It's your fault he believes all those racist lies! Your fault, Jeff! Now he believes white people actually amounted to something more than the rest of us! Now he'll never accept the truth that

whites were mostly savage, ignorant, racist suppressors who stole the credit for the world's greatest ideas and inventions from the real contributors to human progress—the Africans!"

When Jeff tried to speak, to reason, to defend, Li Ming slashed out at him again and again: "If you hadn't misled him, he might have eventually accepted who and what he was! But oh, no! Not Mr. Historian of older times! You had to go on and on, didn't you! Telling him how World Gov rewrote history as the price we all had to pay for racial harmony and world peace! What a laugh! How dare you for telling him such lies! You—a backwater skoolplex administrator! A nobody! A nothing! Claiming to know more about history than World Gov! Had I not felt something for you at one time, I would have turned you in to Wopo long ago!"

He took it all, everything she had to throw at him. All the pent-up hatred, the venom, the rage: "It makes me sick the way you corrupted Adam. Stressed him out to the point where he couldn't even function any longer. Now stop! Don't you dare try to defend yourself! I don't care if World Gov intends to honor you next month in Beijing with their Outstanding Citizen Award for helping stop a Nayra terrorist plot. I don't care that your name got mentioned on a World Gov In Action broadcast on all seven continents. Shiva to all that! None of that matters! What matters is that your son was expelled from universityplex two months ago because he started screaming in History of Great African Achievements that a white man was the first to land on the moon! Imagine that, Jeff! A white man! Your doing, no doubt! Dear Allah—what have you done to his mind! Now he's warped beyond all hope of recovery and doomed to spending the rest of his life locked away inside some mentalplex down in Antarctica! And it's all your fault, you filthy racist bastard! I hope you rot in hell!!!"

Two weeks after their divorce became final, Jeff lost his bungalow. As a result, he was forced to relocate to the staff dorm. Fortunately, being a skoolplex administrator still entitled him to a class 1 cubicle, so he hadn't to share it with anyone. Even so, the sudden loss of his relatively spacious living quarters all but demoralized him, and from that point on he spent his evenings alone, often wandering the campus late at night, trying to put the broken pieces of his life back together again. Yet, deep down, he knew his life would never be the same.

On a hot, rainy night in the month of Shebat-Jumada, Jeff Huxton glanced up at an unexpected knock at his door. It was past eleven in the evening, and tomorrow he had a long day ahead. Rising wearily from behind the cramped little desk of his dormitory cubicle, where he had been busy on a report, he wondered what sort of student might be so troubled as to bother him at this late hour.

Perhaps it was one of Mr. Soong's pupils, seven of which Jeff had been forced to

reassign to the Maputo Sewage Plant earlier in the week due to substandard grades. Sealing a student's fate as a manual laborer was never a pleasant task for him, even when it was absolutely necessary. In truth, only the brightest students could ever hope for a decent job in a world swarming with nineteen billion competitive souls, he knew.

Be that as it may, Jeff always hated explaining to some disappointed student why World Gov had wisely decided that a lifetime of mindless toil was "best" for him. And the mere fact that he would have to do his utmost in convincing such a student that one day he would come to know "a deep and lasting satisfaction" cleaning out sewage filtration systems utterly depressed him. Nevertheless, it remained his sacred duty to guide every student under his care towards their ultimate destiny, no matter how unpleasant that destiny might be.

He pressed open the door.

In the hallway stood a lone man, white-haired and serenely dignified. His eyes were somber and wise, the color of patina on old bronze, ancient with memories. Jeff felt strangely drawn to the man, as one is drawn to the mysteries of a deep and unknowable sea.

"Good evening, Mr. Huxton. My name is Dr. Vladimir Zaslov. May I come in?" Startled by the identity of his unexpected visitor, Jeff momentarily hesitated. Then, without a word, he gestured the ageing scientist in.

After the door to his quarters hummed closed again, Jeff turned around and faced his visitor. "What can I do for you, Dr. Zaslov?"

"I wish to have a word with you, if I may."

Jeff motioned towards a chair.

As Zaslov settled into it, Jeff returned to his desk and sat down again. "If you don't mind my saying, Dr. Zaslov, this visit is a bit out of the ordinary. And, perhaps, a little dangerous."

"Then you must be aware of my encounter with Karl Ramstrom."

"I'm aware."

The old man studied Jeff for a moment, his eyes tarnished coins of thought. "I suppose he told you how he tried to get me to join him."

"He did."

"That was about a year ago, of course, in South America Zone 9. One afternoon he approached me outside the Che Guevara Research Lab where I work as a physicist."

"What happened?"

"We talked. About many things. But mostly about certain scientific research I've been doing. To say the least, Mr. Huxton, I found him to be a compelling gentleman. Unlike any I've ever met."

"So why didn't you join up with him?"

"Loyalty to World Gov, I suppose. To their ideals of racial harmony. To everything we've been raised to believe was best for mankind."

"And now?"

Zaslov nodded his head with uncertainty. "I don't know anymore . . . I'm an old man now, and a rather confused one. Like you, I was born into this world under the aegis of World Gov. I've never known any other. That is, not until I met Karl Ramstrom. Over a period of several hours, he told me of the world that existed before the Unification, before the planet became racially homogenized. He told me how Europe and the United States of America had led mankind in scientific progress, art, culture, and virtually everything else at one time. What he told me contradicted everything I was ever led to believe about that era." Zaslov gazed down at his withered, veined hands. "And frankly, I was most upset by it. In fact, I went home that evening and cried. Cried over what—or whom—I still can't say . . ."

For a moment, Jeff lowered his eyes too. He knew what Zaslov was talking about, even though he could not name it himself. It was an indefinable feeling of betrayal, a vague sense of something great that had risen upon the Earth, only to be beaten down again—and destroyed.

Truth, Karl had called it.

The truth behind the Unification—and why that truth had long ago been buried beneath a racial graveyard of lies.

But no—these were forbidden thoughts.

Thoughts that had no place in the world—or one's mind.

"You were right to resist Karl Ramstrom," Jeff finally said, bringing his own loyalty to World Gov to bear. "You did the right thing."

Zaslov nodded. "I keep telling myself that, Mr. Huxton. But still, I have to wonder . . ."

And so do I, Jeff thought, remembering again that final moment facing Karl Ramstrom before he rode into the sky on a pillar of flame.

"Why did Ramstrom seek you out?"

Zaslov looked up. "Because of certain research I've been doing at Che Guevara. You

see, he's a physicist himself back on Mars. And, by talking with him, a rather brilliant one."

"I'm afraid you've lost me, Doctor. What are you talking about?"

"Forgive me," Zaslov apologized. "Several years ago Ramstrom became aware of my research through Avalon agents working here on Earth. Back on Mars, he too is engaged in such research. That is one of the reasons why the Avalons sent him to Earth—to recruit me for their own project."

"I see. But just what kind of research are you talking about—in layman's terms?"

Zaslov glanced out the window into the night. "Research into star travel, Mr. Huxton."

Jeff took a moment to absorb Zaslov's answer. It was not easy, since the quest for space had ended long ago, shortly after the Unification seized the world. "Why would World Gov bother to promote such research, Dr. Zaslov? After all, they abandoned the colonization of our own solar system decades ago."

Zaslov glanced down into his hands again, as if he too had long pondered the same question. "I don't know, Mr. Huxton. All I know is that the highest echelons of World Gov have given top priority to my research since I began on it five years ago. And one does not question the motives of World Gov."

True enough, Jeff thought. Not if one wanted to go on breathing.

"And what in particular was Karl Ramstrom seeking from you?"

"Research data regarding ion propulsion systems I've been working on. In particular, those capable of obtaining near-light speeds. Data that now makes the building of a starship possible."

Something about the whole affair was beginning to trouble Jeff, though he couldn't quite put a finger on it. Why were the leaders of World Gov suddenly so interested in star travel?

"And did you give this research data to Karl Ramstrom?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"As I said earlier, my loyalty to World Gov prevented it."

"What did Ramstrom do?"

"Nothing. He went away after that. And I never saw him again."

"Did he say anything before going?"

“Yes, there was one thing.”

“What?”

“Something about World Gov . . . something about how they needed a stardrive even more desperately than the Avalons did. Then he laughed in that carefree manner of his, and walked away.”

“What did he mean by it?”

Zaslov shrugged. “To this day, I have no idea.”

Jeff let the matter drop, then asked, “How did you get permission to come to Africa, anyway?”

“I’m here in New Theravada attending a scientific conference. I knew you lived here, after hearing your name mentioned on the news a while back. So, I decided to take this opportunity to come over and talk with you.”

“I suppose you know you’ve taken quite a risk doing so.”

“I know.”

“Does it have anything to do with what happened at Johannesburg Space Port that day?”

“Yes, Mr. Huxton. You see, for some time now, I’ve been troubled by the events that transpired there. At least—as I heard them reported by World Gov In Action.”

“And what did you hear?”

“I heard what everyone else heard: that Karl Ramstrom and his followers were destroyed by Wopo missiles as they tried to flee in a hijacked solarship.”

Jeff pondered his own hands for a moment, then said, “And you don’t believe it?”

“I don’t know . . . it may very well be true. But, as a high-level government scientist, I’m all too aware of how such reports invariably favor World Gov, especially when there’s a conflict between the truth and their inviolate public image.”

Jeff looked curiously at the old man. “I’ve never met anyone of your high status openly admit that World Gov ever practices such deception.”

“I’m afraid they do, whenever they deem it necessary. I suppose they feel that children do not always need to know what their parents are up to.”

“An apt metaphor,” Jeff replied. “I’ve always felt like a child myself, whenever it comes to World Gov. Protected, cared for, but never fully allowed to grow up.”

“That is why I came to see you, Mr. Huxton. Knowing what I do about World Gov, I had every reason to doubt that Ramstrom was destroyed. But you were there that day. Tell



me . . . what really happened?"

Jeff leaned back in his chair, remembering again the sight of Karl's solarship rising, rising, rising. Even now, it reminded him so much of a burning torch of victory.

"He made it," Jeff solemnly answered, "to freedom."

On hearing Jeff's softly spoken words, Zaslov's head tilted forward into trembling hands, and for a moment his frail shoulders shook with the pent-up release of some long-held fear. After a time, he looked up again, quiet and drawn.

"So, she's not dead after all . . ."

"Who, Dr. Zaslov?"

"My granddaughter Emerald."

Jeff's breath caught in his throat. "Emerald was your granddaughter?"

Zaslov nodded a weary head. "It's hard for me to talk about it, even now. But yes, she was. A year ago she escaped from South America with Karl Ramstrom and his followers and came here to Africa. Up until I finally lost track of her, she kept in contact with me using an illegal device to make transcontinental calls. Something Ramstrom had given her, I think. Anyway, the last call she ever made to me was all about a young man named Adam she had met and fallen in love with." Zaslov leaned forward. "That young man was your son, Mr. Huxton."

Jeff dropped his blue eyes for a moment, unable to bear Zaslov's penetrating stare. Then, slowly, he raised them again. "I had no idea that Emerald was your granddaughter . . ."

"Nor could you have known. As for myself, I didn't make the connection to you until I saw that World Gov In Action report—about how you and your son Adam escaped from Nayra. Then it dawned on me that your son must be the very same Adam my granddaughter had spoken of."

"He was," Jeff admitted.

"Now you know why I had to see you."

"I understand."

"I truly think you do, Mr. Huxton. After all, you risked your own life going after your son. No man would have done that, unless he was a truly devoted father. And yet, something tells me you're not a man who's gotten much love or devotion in return over the years."

Jeff said nothing to that, yet his eyes were attentive, thoughtful, melancholy.

"You see, I too have known little love in my life. I never married, never knew what it was to have a family until Emerald came along. She was orphaned at age two when her parents died during the Brazilian Skintone 1 Uprising. Ever since, she's been in my care."

Zaslov examined the space of air in front of him, as if he were seeing that two-year-old child once again. "Yet, I never permitted myself to call her my daughter. Even back then, I was far too old, gray, and scholarly. I suppose I feared she would grow up to feel ashamed of me, if I did. So, I raised her as my granddaughter, and she never knew or suspected otherwise. Perhaps I loved her more than I should have, Mr. Huxton, for I let her be a free spirit in a world without much freedom. It was hard not to, for she was such a beautiful child . . . like a happy little bird . . . always wanting to lift her wings and fly away . . ." He smiled ruefully. "And then—one day—a stranger named Karl Ramstrom came along—and she did."

Jeff pressed the palm of a hand against a growing ache of guilt behind his forehead. "I'm sorry to say that I never actually met your granddaughter, Dr. Zaslov. But I do know this: my son loved her very much. I finally came to understand that, after she was gone."

"That's something I don't understand, Mr. Huxton. Why didn't your son go with her? After all, she was the mother of his child, was she not?"

Jeff's fist clenched into a tight ball. "Because I refused to let him go, that's why. Unlike you with your granddaughter, I tried to shackle my son, to cage him, to break his wings." He looked away. "Until I finally did."

Jeff got up and walked over to the window, his eyes distant and forlorn. Moments like this were always the most terrible for him. Moments when he was reminded of his lost family, and of the deep regret he always felt for having caused their loss. How many other nights had he sat here, alone, staring out into the moonlit African night seeking something beyond the known distance of his memories? Seeking, and yet never really understanding what it was. Love? A new start in life? Or perhaps, just an end to it? He was never quite certain, even now.

"Please, Mr. Huxton . . . don't condemn yourself. You did what any father would have done."

Jeff turned around and looked at the old scientist for a moment, then returned once again to his desk. Opening a drawer, he pulled out a bottle of Nomo-Hunga and shook out a couple of tablets, offering one to Zaslov. For in a world of perpetual famine, there was little dignity to be gained in polite restraint, and the scientist took it in silent thanks.

As they chewed on their tablets, each man momentarily lost himself in private thought. Then, breaking the silence again, Zaslov asked: "Is it true what I heard—that your son was remanded to a mentalplex in Antarctica Zone 17?"

Jeff opened the drawer again and tossed in the bottle of Nomo-Hunga. "So you know about that."

Zaslov lowered his eyes in sympathy. "I learned of it through a government contact I have."

"It's true," Jeff said, a bitter cast to his eyes.

"What happened, if I may ask?"

"He had a nervous breakdown."

"I'm sorry."

"It happened one morning while he was attending universityplex. He—"

"Yes?"

"He stood up and told his entire history class it was all a lie—everything their professor was saying. Everything—" Jeff clenched his fist in angry guilt, "—that I've ever told him was a lie."

"Will your son be released anytime soon?"

"I'm afraid we're both in for a long wait. In fact, it may be years before they release him, if ever."

Zaslov made no comment. The gravity of his silence was statement enough.

After a time, he rose to his feet and walked over to the window, staring out into the rainy African night. "There's no doubt that you and I have proven to be loyal supporters of this society, Mr. Huxton. We've served it without question in the name of worldwide racial harmony. But maybe—just maybe—the whole idea wasn't such a good thing after all."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the deliberate homogenization of humanity by intentionally blending its collective body into one Universal Man. Such an act not only borders on the insane," he turned and looked at Jeff, "it also marks every individual responsible as a genocidal monster."

Jeff grinned darkly. "Better watch it, Dr. Zaslov. You're beginning to sound like a prime candidate for a mentalplex yourself. How do you know I won't call Wopo and turn you in?"

The old man shrugged. "It wouldn't matter to me if you did. Not now. You see, my life is almost over." He glanced out again at the rainy darkness. "I've incurable brain cancer."

Jeff swallowed, ashamed now he had made such a remark.

Zaslov, seeing his expression, waved a frail hand in gentle dismissal. "You're a good man trying very hard to be a bitter one, Mr. Huxton. It's unbecoming of you."

"I've had a lot of practice lately."

"Indeed you have. First your son is sent to a mentalplex. And then your wife divorces you because of it."

"So you know about that too . . ."

"Yes, I checked up on you. I also learned that your daughter Puja recently enlisted in the Euth Corps." He gestured a pale hand about the tiny living quarters. "And how you finally came to this . . ."

"I see."

"I myself never had a family . . . except for Emerald. You had one . . . and yet it was taken from you. And now, we're both quite alone."

"I'll survive."

"Will you?"

Jeff sucked in a deep breath. "It's rather late, Dr. Zaslov. I'm afraid we'll have to end this conversation."

The old man nodded. "Very well. But before I go, I have something to give you." He reached into a pocket and withdrew a small glass vial, holding it forth.

"What is it?"

"The sum total of my stardrive research."

Jeff looked down at the vial, at the bluish-green liquid contained within. "I don't understand."

"For the past five years I've spent every waking moment of my life trying to solve the secret of star travel," Dr. Zaslov explained. "Last month, I finally did. It was the very same problem that had stumped Karl Ramstrom in the course of his own research. When first we met, I was somewhat closer to achieving a breakthrough than he was, and so he sought me out. It seems the Avalons want to abandon their Martian colony for the far shores of Alpha Centauri. Why, I don't know. Anyway, Ramstrom was uncertain he could ever achieve a solution, brilliant though he was. Only now, it doesn't matter. I've achieved it. And now, I want to present it to him—and my granddaughter—as a final gift."

Jeff looked again at the glass cylinder in Dr. Zaslov's hand. "And you're telling me that all your years of research are contained in that single vial?"

“Yes, everything—the ion stardrive, the transpatial field equations, the dytanium accelerator coil specifications, even the recommended life-support systems. All contained within this small vial of liquid. And once its molecular datacules have been scanned and decoded, the key to building mankind’s first starship will open up the universe.” He extended the vial towards Jeff. “And I’m entrusting it entirely to you.”

“But why me?” Jeff asked, reluctantly accepting the vial.

“Why, Mr. Huxton? For one reason: you still have a chance to escape this society. As you may already be aware, there are several other Nayra cells operating on Earth that would gladly aid you in reaching Mars, especially if they knew you possessed this research.”

“I don’t know what to say . . .”

“There isn’t much to say. We both know that the past of our people is forever gone on this planet. History has been rewritten, and we of our kind have been erased. As for those of us who still survive, such as you and I, we have no possible future left in this world.” Zaslov moved his amber eyes towards the window again, gazing out into the night. “But there may be a future for our race elsewhere . . .”

Jeff slowly closed his fingers over the vial.

A universe of stars, he thought, held there in the palm of his hand.

Yet, he wondered if he really wanted that responsibility.

“Even if this is your creation, Dr. Zaslov, it remains the rightful property of World Gov.”

“They would certainly agree with you.”

For a thoughtful moment, Jeff fell silent. Then: “And if I should drop this vial on the floor and crush it underfoot?”

Zaslov shrugged. “Then you would wipe out the work of an old man, along with humanity’s last chance to reach the stars . . . perhaps forever.”

“What if I don’t want this responsibility?”

“That’s entirely up to you. Either way, the Zaslov stardrive is now in your care. You may destroy it, turn it over to World Gov, or seek out the next Avalon agent that you can and tell him you have it. He’ll make certain you reach Karl Ramstrom.”

“Why should I even want to give it to him? I had a chance to go to Mars and chose not to.”

“Because things have changed for you, Mr. Huxton. No longer do you have any bond

to this world. Your family is gone, and you are quite alone. Reaching Mars may be the last chance you have.”

“Last chance for what?”

“Happiness.”

Jeff fell silent again, considering the old scientist’s words. Yes, his life had never been more empty than now. After Li Ming and Puja had departed, the last wind had gone out of his spiritual sails, leaving him stranded in a vast doldrums of loneliness. He no longer cared for his work, nor very much anymore for his students. And that, most of all, saddened him beyond measure.

Jeff took in a somber breath. “Why didn’t you give this responsibility to someone else? Why me of all people?”

“I had no one else I could trust.”

“What makes you think you can trust me?”

Zaslov smiled in gentle reply, “I have no choice but to trust you, Mr. Huxton. After all, I come to you bearing a gift not only for my grandchild—but for yours.”

Yes, Jeff thought, his grandchild—the one Emerald had been pregnant with that day at Johannesburg. The one whose father was now under psychiatric restraint deep inside an Antarctic mentalplex . . .

“My research data is not safe kept in the vial,” Zaslov was saying, bringing Jeff back into focus. “You must drink it in order to prevent it from falling into World Gov’s hands, since you now possess the only copy left in existence. You see, before I left South America to come here, I erased all computer records of my work back at the Che Guevara Research Lab.”

Jeff examined the vial of liquid in his hand. “Are you saying it’s necessary for me to drink this?”

“I’m afraid so. The vial of liquid that you hold contains millions of microscopic datacules,” Zaslov explained, “which will embed themselves in the cells of your body for up to two years. After that, the formula dissipates and becomes unreadable. Until then, however, the information can be accessed by passing your body under a special scanning device.”

“I’ve never even heard of datacules,” Jeff remarked skeptically, “or of any such device capable of decoding them.”

“That’s because such a device exists in but one place only—Mars.”

“You mean . . . Avalon technology?”

“That’s correct. Before Karl Ramstrom departed, he gave me the means to convert my research to datacules in the event I should ever decide to join up with another Nayra cell. But the technology is unknown on Earth. Therefore, even if you should fall into the hands of Wopo, they would have no possible means of extracting it from you.”

“Well, I’m not so sure they’d be convinced of that,” Jeff replied dryly, opening a drawer and setting the vial inside. “But until I decide what to do, I’ll keep it here. Fair enough?”

“Fair enough, Mr. Huxton,” Zaslov replied, even as he made for the door. “Because from this point on, the fate of my stardrive remains entirely in your hands.”

“And if I should turn it over to World Gov tomorrow morning?”

Zaslov smiled. “Then you will.”

At that, the old scientist abruptly turned away and hurried off, like a comet receding into the black depths of space.

The following day, World Gov In Action reported the suicide of a visiting research scientist in a downtown New Theravada hotel. The report concluded: “. . . despondent over his failing health, Dr. Vladimir Zaslov took his own life rather than continue to burden the planet’s overtaxed medical system with the cost of treating his terminal illness. In so doing, he set another fine example of public-spirited sacrifice, which will serve as inspiration to us all . . .”

That evening, Jeff Huxton swallowed the contents of Zaslov’s vial, then crushed the empty cylinder to pieces. Afterward, he scattered the fragments along the skoolplex grounds as he walked in solitude beneath the glittering African stars.





# Twelve

*“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven; a time to be born and a time to die.”*

— *Ecclesiastes*

Red dawn split the horizon between earth and sky as the hyperjet slowed to hover-mode above the sprawling capitol of Earth. Gazing down from his seat, Jeff Huxton beheld the crystalline towers of Beijing in the early morning light, their glassy, metallic surfaces burnished amber, gold, and vermillion.

From this central nexus World Gov ruled the lives of nineteen billion souls on seven continents, Jeff realized. It was a magnificent, if daunting achievement, to the mind of a forty-nine-year-old skoolplex administrator from a small African backwater. And yet, here he was, at special invitation of World Gov, to attend a State dinner honoring twenty-seven Outstanding World Citizens, of which he was one.

Trying to settle his nerves, Jeff leaned back in his thickly padded seat as the hyperjet began its final, measured descent. Beyond the window to his left, gleaming, multi-faceted buildings slid upward into view, as if he remained stationary and they were gigantic living organisms growing higher and higher towards the sun.

World Gov.

Perspiration broke out on the palms of his hands.

World Gov . . .

Not one citizen in ten thousand ever graced his eyes on what he was seeing now, Jeff knew. And, fewer still with skintone ratings like his. For this was indeed the high point of his life, he realized. Fate, no matter what it had in store, would never again bring him this way.

With tension mounting, Jeff wiped his hands on the cushioned armrests of his seat.

Others surrounded him, he noticed, brought here from all corners of the Earth. Some were undoubtedly here for the same reason as himself—to be honored for some service or another to World Gov. The remainder appeared to be mostly high-ranking bureaucrats. A few were Euth-Commissioners, judging by their Aesculapian collar insignias; here, he surmised, to report on their latest euthanasia operations. Two rows up

from where he sat, he spied a pair of grim-faced Wopo officers. Even from this distance, they exuded a cold and lethal aura. In front of them sat a very recognizable government entertainment star—blessed with perfect multi-racial characteristics: thickened lips, coily black hair, vaguely slanted eyes, and brownish-yellow skin.

The power elite, Jeff thought.

Feeling a sudden pang of envy, he realized that these majestic vistas of World Gov he so thoroughly sat in awe of were merely common sights to them, just part of their everyday lives. He wondered what they might think of him, were they to suddenly discover that he was just a minor bureaucrat from a hot and dusty backwater like New Theravada? Yet, he tried not to think of that, feeling old inferiorities rising in him. Suddenly, he found himself painfully aware of his own racial appearance, of his thick shock of sandy-brown hair, of his archaic, ruddy, Anglo-Saxon features, of his deep set cobalt-blue eyes.

I'm so sorry for you, Adam . . .

Sorry for ever bringing one such as you into a world like this. For you and I are intrusive white ants lost amongst a giant heap of brown ones. You could not survive knowing what you are—and I—I just barely can. Yet, this pain was necessary, my son!

It was necessary!

A moment later the hyperjet touched down, jarring Jeff back to the present.

"Welcome to Beijing, fellow citizens . . ." a pleasant female voice intoned, "the heart of World Gov and the magnificent capital of Earth . . ."

Jeff remained still, waiting for his seatbelt to release. A moment later, free, he headed down the aisle towards the exit, where the first rays of dawn washed over him and the titanic city that ruled over all the peoples of Earth.

After he settled into his hotel room at Hillary Rodham Clinton Towers—courtesy of World Gov—Jeff wondered what he could do for the next twelve hours until the state dinner. There was plenty of sightseeing he could get in, of course. Or he could just relax in the luxurious spaciousness of his room, enjoying unlimited food and drink—all, again, courtesy of World Gov. Being honored as an Outstanding World Citizen certainly paid generous dividends, he thought, even if he remained a bit uncomfortable with the concept of "unlimited food and drink."

Yet, until now, he had always assumed that all citizens, no matter what their status, were on permanent rations. After all, in a world with nineteen billion hungry mouths, how could it possibly be otherwise? Even so, Jeff found no sign of a Nomo-Hunga dispenser anywhere in the room. On the other hand, there was a foodmatik in his

quarter's micro-kitchen—without restrictions! Walking over to it, he couldn't resist ordering up three breakfast portions of everything, the first time in his life he had eaten so gluttonously.

Still, he was vaguely troubled by it all, even as he relished each morsel of food. After all, the two extra meals he was busily devouring could have gone to feed two extra mouths somewhere in the world.

If so, why hadn't they . . . ?

Furthermore, would those two extra mouths now have to die inside a World Gov euth-chamber, operated by someone like his daughter, simply for want of the food he was now eating?

No—he silently admonished himself.

Better stop that kind of thinking right now. It was not his place to question the wisdom of so intricate and finely balanced a mechanism as World Gov. Questioning anything at all, in fact, only got one into trouble—something that old man Parker back in Australia Zone 5 had never learned. Nor, for that matter, his own wayward son . . .

Suddenly thinking of Adam, Jeff rose from the small table where he'd sat down to eat and walked across the hotel room to a wall monitor. It had been weeks since he had checked up on him. Perhaps he was doing a bit better after undergoing months of intensive psychotherapy.

Sitting down in a chair, he faced the wall monitor and spoke the number that would connect him to Mentalplex 306 in Antarctica Zone 17. A moment later the stern image of Adam's mental health counselor blossomed into view.

"Jeff Huxton here. Just calling to check up on the progress of my son, Adam. How has he been responding to treatment, Counselor Fong?"

Counselor Margaret Fong had a thin, rather pinched face, drained of anything even remotely resembling kindness. She looked at Jeff with a coldness that reflected the frigid environment in which she worked, which Jeff could just catch a glimpse of beyond a window behind her. The stark vista reminded him of the fact that no one had ever escaped from the icy fortress of an Antarctic mentalplex—and lived.

"Your son is no longer here, Mr. Huxton."

The abrupt statement caught Jeff momentarily off guard, like a sudden slap across the face. "What do you mean he's no longer there? I haven't been informed of any transfer—"

"Your son was an extremely violent individual, Mr. Huxton," Counselor Fong rudely cut in, as if his fatherly concerns were of no consequence to her. "Extremely violent—and

completely uncooperative.”

Jeff took a moment to catch his breath, for his heart was beating quickly now. Something was very wrong about this. “What do you mean he was ‘uncooperative’? What in Shiva’s name does that mean?”

“You will control your abusive language immediately, or I will terminate this call.”

Jeff choked back his anger and croaked out, “Tell me.”

“Our panel of psychiatrists found your son to be hopelessly deluded. Psychotic, manic-depressive, possibly schizophrenic. Quite incapable of grasping reality. He believed history was a fraud, that it was mostly a clever fabrication of World Gov. He kept spouting off utter nonsense to our other patients about historical events that never happened. Several in particular were most distressing. Something or other about who first landed on the moon and who really invented the airplane. As we both know, of course, the first person to land on the moon was a young African-American woman named Neela Armstrong and that the airplane was invented in the southeast China city of Guangzhou by two brothers named Lian and Shaiming Wong in the Pre-Unification year of 1903. A simple historical fact. Yet, your son became quite upset when this was pointed out to him by several of our mentalplex staff. Needless to say, he had to be forcibly restrained and medicated.”

“And afterward . . . ?”

“He was confined to a padded cell for his own safety for a period of two weeks and seemed to be responding well to medication and group therapy. However, he became extremely violent again when I personally transferred him to Patient Satisfaction Services—a mandatory participation program for certain long-term patients.”

“What exactly is that?”

Counselor Fong raised an imperious eyebrow at Jeff, disdainful of anyone uninformed about the functions of a mentalplex. “For your information, Mr. Huxton, life inside a mentalplex is very frustrating and lonely for many of our patients. After many weeks and months—sometimes years—of confinement they long for a human caress . . . a human bonding, if you will, that we staff simply cannot provide them with. Decades of mental health research have concluded that deprivation of the sex act, even for the mentally ill, is psychologically harmful over the long term and one which we attempt to alleviate through our Patient Satisfaction Services. Selected patients who are still young and . . . vital . . . are required, as part of their recovery plan, to meet the sexual needs of our older, less agile patients. This type of physical bonding can be quite—”

Jeff cut in sharply, “What in hell are you talking about? My son is not the kind who can—”

Counselor Fong leveled two bead-like, obsidian eyes on Jeff's blue ones. "Another interruption like that and this call will be terminated and a report made. Do you understand me, Mr. Huxton?"

In that one instant, Jeff wanted to reach through the wall monitor and strangle the shriveled old bitch, but he forced himself to contain his anger. "I . . . understand."

"Then you must also understand that our PSS program was in need of H-Class participants and so we—"

The anger Jeff had been desperately fighting to hold back suddenly broke through in a dam burst of outrage. "H-Class? My son is not classified as a homosexual! Why would he even be transferred to an H-Class program?"

"As I stated to you," Counselor Fong went on between clenched teeth, "we were short of H-Class participants. Your son was being reconditioned by our staff psychiatrists so that he could engage in mutually satisfying homosexual activities with some of our geriatric H-Class patients in strong need of such sexual therapy. It was only after he attacked and seriously injured one of the doctors instructing him on proper fellatio procedures that I had no choice but to remand him to the custody of Wopo and—"

"You goddamned fucking bitch! Where did they take my son! Tell me or I'll—"

The wall monitor suddenly went blank and Jeff stood up, bashing a fist futilely against it. It would be useless to call back, he knew. Counselor Fong would permanently block any further communication from him.

For a long time he just stood there, enveloped in a miasma of quiet rage and despair. Where had they taken his son? And why hadn't they bothered to tell him? And had Adam really been sent to Mentalplex 306 by World Gov in order to help him—or simply as a means to break him down into a compliant, obedient, unquestioning citizen?

Jeff could find no answers to his anguished questions. He knew one thing, however—what little spirit that hadn't been destroyed in his son after he had been forced to abandon Emerald and his unborn child had finally been snuffed out by the likes of Counselor Fong.

For the moment, though, it would do him no good to pursue the matter, much as he would like to. He needed to settle his jangled nerves first, then contact Wopo headquarters and find out where they had taken his son. If he was calm about it, they need never suspect Adam's true involvement with Nayra—a fact neither he nor his son had ever revealed. So, until then, it was best if he put his fear and anger aside, and went on about his affairs as if nothing had happened.

With that settled, Jeff decided the best thing he could do was take in some

sightseeing, perhaps tour the Great Hall of Humanity or—

At that moment, a chime sounded at the door, bringing his head around. Walking over, he summoned the door open. As it slid aside, a man of medium height came into view, dark complexioned with oily, slick black hair. He looked back at Jeff with two piercing light gray eyes, unusual for a man of his otherwise dusky appearance. “Name’s Sovek, Mr. Huxton. Enrique Sovek.” He reached out and flashed a badge. “Wopo.”

Jeff paused uncertainly, searching for something diplomatic to say to this unwanted visitor. With the fate of his son still troubling him, he only wanted to be alone, to have a few meager hours of solitude while he walked off his stress somewhere along the myriad streets of Beijing.

“There must be some mistake, Officer Sovek. I’m in no need of assistance.”

“You don’t seem to understand, Mr. Huxton. I’ve been assigned as your escort while you’re in the capital. From this point on, you don’t take a step out of this hotel room without me at your side. Understood?”

Jeff had no time to object as the Wopo officer pushed his way into the room, checking it over with darting, snake-like flicks of his eyes. Suddenly taking note of Jeff’s uneaten breakfast across the room, he walked over and retrieved a morsel, examining it as if it were a piece of crime evidence. Then he swiveled around and stared at Jeff. “I once knew a kid who died during the Calcutta Famine back in ’78 who would have killed for half of what you wasted here, Mr. Huxton.” He tossed the food back onto the plate. “He was my younger brother.”

Jeff looked away, shame in his eyes. Wasted food in a world of nineteen billion hungry mouths was indeed a grievous sin. He started to say something in the way of apology, then thought better of it. Sovek did not look like a man who would accept one.

As Jeff watched, the Wopo officer resumed his inspection, scrutinizing every corner of the hotel room. When he finished, he turned and faced Jeff again, cold assessment in his incongruous gray eyes. “So you’re the guy who saved his son from those Nayra terrorists at Johannesburg a few months ago . . .”

Jeff nodded.

“Well, well,” Sovek replied, walking up to Jeff with a barely suppressed grin on his sharp, triangular face. “Funny thing, though . . . You don’t look tough enough to have done it. Not a deskbound skoolplex administrator like you.” He glanced about the room again, casually, but with a deadly glow in his eyes. “You sure you told the judge everything that happened that day, Mr. Huxton?”

Jeff’s jaw hardened. He had suspected he would not like this man, and now he was

certain. "I left nothing out, Officer Sovek. It's all in the official Wopo report I made."

"So you say . . ." Sovek murmured, trailing a finger along the surface of a table, as if checking for traces of dust. Then he jerked his eyes up again. "So how is it that Karl Ramstrom managed to disarm Rudolf Marten so easily and then kill him while you stood by doing nothing? Seems to me this Ramstrom character must have had some help taking down a tough guy like him, if you ask me." Sovek came up face to face with Jeff, a glaze of accusation in his eyes. "Maybe someone like you, Mr. Huxton."

Jeff, all too aware now of what was going on, refused to snatch at the bait. So that was it, he thought. Wopo must still doubt his story, even after all this time. Only his relative status as a skoolplex administrator had spared him and Adam from a more brutal Wopo inquisition months ago, he realized, one that would have gotten the truth out of them and sent them both to a euth-chamber.

"I think you should read the report again," Jeff replied, "until it sticks."

Thin lips curled back in a savage grin. "You're real good with words, Mr. Huxton. So good you fooled a lot of people with your report." He took a step forward. "But not me."

Jeff bit down his anger. "I explained what happened that day, Officer Sovek. It's not my problem if you can't accept the truth."

Abruptly, Jeff turned away from the penetrating eyes of Enrique Sovek and walked over to a wall unit, dispensing a glass of synthetic scotch. As Sovek watched him, he stood drinking in strained silence, hoping the alcohol would steady his nerves.

"Some of us think Karl Ramstrom wouldn't have taken along anyone who wasn't a willing partner to his escape plan," Sovek burrowed on. "So maybe you and your son weren't really kidnapped, as you claim. Maybe Ramstrom had already recruited your son, Mr. Huxton. And when you found out about it, you went after him, hoping to save his skin."

He knows, Jeff thought, with a sudden stab of fear.

He knows and now—

Yet, he did his best not to look alarmed as he slowly turned around and bravely faced the Wopo officer again. "An interesting theory, Mr. Sovek. But theories aren't proof—and never will be." Then, as calmly as he could, he finished off his drink, all the while holding Sovek's icy gray stare.

In return, Sovek regarded Jeff for a long and dangerous moment, as if some fine, intricate mechanism was spinning and reeling about inside his brain. "Maybe not, Mr. Huxton. Then again, some theories have a certain stench of truth about them . . ."





# Thirteen

*“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”*

— Edmund Burke

That evening, Wopo officer Enrique Sovek dutifully escorted Jeff Huxton to the Outstanding World Citizen gala, both men resplendent in state-issued formal attire. There was one important difference in their respective appearance, however—the slight bulge evident just below Sovek’s armpit, at the point where his holstered plasma gun lay concealed.

“You’re going to be around a lot of big shots tonight, Huxton,” Sovek reminded as he directed Jeff through the Great Hall. “More than you’ve ever seen in your life. So take this piece of advice—don’t talk to any of them unless they talk to you first. Got it? And another thing: don’t make any comments at dinner about how much food there is—it makes these big shots uncomfortable whenever some rube from the hinterland brings that up. Got it?”

Jeff nodded.

Yet, he had to wonder why there should be any discomfort—unless some cause for guilt lay behind it. Again, he felt vaguely disturbed by it all as he looked around the vast hall, filled with hundreds of important officials. For the first time, it became obvious to him just how well-fed everyone in the upper levels of government appeared. Back in New Theravada the average citizen appeared gaunt, more often than not. And citizens unlucky enough to live in famine zones fared even worse, he knew. In fact, the whole world suffered from chronic lack of food; even so, few would ever guess, merely by gazing upon these well-nourished government officials.

A moment later Sovek directed Jeff to their assigned table, one already occupied by six other guests. As Jeff seated himself, he glanced at the table next to his, a large one encircled by a dozen important-looking men and women of various ages. To Jeff’s eyes they appeared totally lost in a private world all their own, as if they were not really there at all but merely a mirage floating upon some distant horizon. An aura of power and privilege, almost palpable in the air surrounding them, made him feel instantly small

and out of place. Sovek was right—he did feel like a rube from the hinterland, even as the cruel-faced Wopo agent gave him a last-second glare, warning him once again to keep his mouth shut about all the abundant platters of food every guest was busy indulging in.

“Ah, Jeff, so nice to see you again after all these years,” a deep voice suddenly hailed from the adjacent table, glass of champagne poised in the huge maw of a hand.

Jeff, uncomfortably aware that he was one of the few unblended individuals in the entire auditorium, turned a pale, sharp-featured Anglo-Saxon face in the direction of the familiar voice.

“You do remember me, Jeff . . . ?” the bland face repeated, a face like a visual echo of the teeming billions beyond the walls of the Great Hall. The face of humanity, Jeff thought. The face Adam had never been a part of, nor I.

“Yes . . . yes, of course,” Jeff finally sputtered, inwardly embarrassed over his lack of immediate recognition. “Forgive me. It’s been a long time.”

“Seven years, Jeff. A long time indeed.” The voice of Ahmad Yehudit, World Gov’s recently appointed Commissioner of Multiculturalism, was as rich and mellow as Jeff remembered it. It was the voice of one preaching a sermon in church, or perhaps intoning a eulogy at one’s graveside. And yet, behind the voice there lay a secret hint of laughter, as if other, more interesting things were known, but left unspoken.

After another sip of champagne, Yehudit commented about the absence of Li Ming, “I’m rather surprised and a bit disappointed that your lovely wife isn’t here tonight to share in your triumph, Jeff. After all, it isn’t every day that a man like you gets honored for outstanding service to World Gov.”

“No, I suppose it isn’t,” Jeff replied, raising his drink and taking a sip. Even as he did, he regretted the bitter note of irritation in his voice, brought on by Ahmad’s stinging reference to his faithless ex-wife.

Or was it that?

He looked again at the lavish display of food on Ahmad’s table. Much of it was unrecognizable to his glance. Yet, it was more the sheer abundance, rather than the unfamiliarity of the cuisine, that momentarily overwhelmed him. Platters upon platters of exotic meat dishes, sauces, and strange desserts overflowed the table. And everywhere he looked Ahmad’s circle of guests ate with licentious abandon, making the scene all the more disturbing.

In fact, Jeff felt the entire spectacle bordered on the obscene, but quickly suppressed the thought the moment it snapped into his brain. It was dangerous to forget, even for an instant, where and with whom he was dining. For Beijing was a

watering hole for the world's political beasts of power—and he was no more than an insignificant insect momentarily allowed to alight in the well-trodden mud at their feet. One false step in any direction and he could easily be ground underfoot.

“Well Jeff, it seems you're quite the celebrity tonight,” Yehudit commented as he fingered a delicate morsel of food into his mouth. He ate with such sensuous abandon that Jeff found it hard to reconcile the man now facing him with the one he knew from Africa years ago. Could this be the same man who had preached of public sacrifice in support of suffering famine victims?

“I'm honored,” Jeff murmured, wondering now just how many thousands of famine victims were dying at that very moment as the faces surrounding him dined with such carefree gaiety. Perhaps this, rather than altruism, was the true reason why so many sought advancement to World Gov.

“Something troubling, you Jeff?”

Jeff forced a pleasant-looking smile onto his face as the cold touch of Sovek's glance fell upon him. “Not at all, Commissioner Yehudit. I'm just a bit overwhelmed, I suppose.”

“Yes . . . it does take some getting used to,” Ahmad agreed, gazing at Jeff from over the rim of his champagne glass. “And please—call me Ahmad. After all, we're old friends, aren't we?”

Jeff lifted a glass of champagne to his lips in a sudden effort to conceal any stray emotion on his face. Something in the huge man's voice hadn't sounded quite right to him, as if a mask had temporarily slipped aside to reveal a hideous snake. Yet, he couldn't be sure, save for a momentary flicker of recognition he sensed had passed between Sovek and Yehudit.

“After the ceremonies conclude, Jeff, our group plans on attending a private little party at Minister Renaldo's residence. If you would like, I would be pleased to have you join us.”

Jeff forced another smile on his face. “Of course, Ahmad. I'd be delighted to come.”

“Excellent, Jeff. I think you'll find the evening,” he popped another succulent morsel into the gaping maw of his mouth, “enlightening.”

As World Gov High Quorum member Hasheem O'Reilly addressed the huge gathering of officials, dignitaries, and honored guests seated below him, ten thousand pairs of racially blended eyes gazed up at him from ten thousand racially homogenized faces as his words echoed through the vast auditorium of the Great Hall: “. . . And

tonight, as we honor these outstanding citizens from around the globe, let us all remember that we honor them not merely for a job well done, but for their participation in an ongoing struggle, one in which all of us, each in our own small way, must continue to fight.”

“Since the Unification, we have joined the peoples of the world in a common bond. And yet, there are malcontents still living among us who would see our global society fractured and destroyed. Whether it be those who falsely spread rumors of political privilege and corruption where none exists, or those who protest against World Gov’s humane and benevolent euthanasia programs, certain factions among us continue to threaten our global peace. Foremost among these factions are the racial terrorists, of which Nayra is the most dangerous of all. Not until they and their kind have been ruthlessly exterminated can humanity ever hope to achieve a permanent and lasting brotherhood . . .”

More speeches followed, all delivered by each of the twelve members of the World Gov High Quorum. Afterwards, every recipient of World Gov’s highest honor—the Outstanding Citizen Award—was summoned to the podium amid thunderous rounds of applause. Jeff stood at rigid attention as High Quorum member Reginald Yamaguchi pinned on his medal, “In honor of Skoolplex Administrator Jeff Huxton’s heroic stance against racial terrorism . . .”

Immediately following the state dinner and awards ceremony, Jeff and Wopo officer Enrique Sovek departed with Ahmad Yehudit’s entourage for Minister Renaldo’s private residence. Jeff had no idea what to expect, for the private residences of World Gov’s premiere leaders were never put on public display, for fear they might become targets of future terrorist attacks. Some had actually been struck by terrorists—so it had been rumored—though it was not something widely known. And even for those familiar with the rumors, it was not something widely believed, for World Gov had long been perceived by the world’s seething billions as totally invincible, and thus not vulnerable to any effective terrorist attack.

As Ahmad Yehudit’s personal hoverkraft cruised east over the countryside of China Sector 222, Jeff was amazed at the extensive, grid-like network of housing projects. Stretching for hundreds of kilometers in all directions, they dwarfed anything he’d ever seen in Africa, or elsewhere. Then again, it was not so surprising when he remembered that China, long after having overrun the last white populations of Russia had—in turn—been overrun by the bursting populations of India and the Arab regions, leaving the former bastion of Orientalism as racially intermixed as the rest of the world.

Ahmad, ever perceptive of the moods of those around him, noticed Jeff’s awe and commented, “Equality in action, Jeff—not just empty promises.”

Jeff offered no reply, and continued gazing into the night. Yet, he couldn't help but feel the piercing eyes of Enrique Sovek burning a tight little spot of hate into the back of his neck from somewhere behind. The cruel-faced Wopo officer had been like this the whole of the evening, as if he were darkly awaiting the arrival of some preordained event. Only what event that might be Jeff had no way of knowing, though he sensed it was very real and fast approaching.

Vaguely, he also sensed that his life was in peril, though he had no obvious evidence for that feeling. After all, Ahmad was the same affable man he had known in Africa years ago, perhaps even more so. Nevertheless, he couldn't shake the feeling that his life was in danger.

"World Gov," Yehudit pleasantly went on in the wake of Jeff's silence, "has done its utmost best to bring about peace and universal prosperity for all mankind. No matter what happens in the years ahead, or what tragedies may befall us, we must always remember that."

Jeff had no idea what Yehudit was driving at, but some kind of ominous hint seemed to lie just below the surface of his words. Only, what kind of hint, he could not yet fathom.

Ahmad went on, "In my years with World Gov, I have come to learn just how noble a dream humanity almost achieved."

Almost achieved?

Ahmad swept his brown hand at the passing countryside below. "World Gov promised the people global shelter—and there it is. They promised a place in society for everyone—and made it so. And all that World Gov has ever asked of any citizen is loyalty. Just that, Jeff—loyalty."

Jeff turned his blue eyes towards the hulking, sepia-toned man beside him. "I have always done my best to be loyal, Ahmad."

The Commissioner of Multiculturalism chuckled deeply. "Surely no one doubts that, Jeff. Least of all, me."

But did he? Jeff suddenly wondered.

For when he considered it, a man in Ahmad's high position must surely have access to every government document concerning the Nayra incident at Johannesburg six months ago. If so, had Ahmad read the reports—as Wopo officer Sovek clearly had—only to doubt their truthfulness? And now that he thought about it, wasn't the proximity of Ahmad's table to his own rather more than just mere coincidence?

Then, in Ahmad's next words, Jeff had the suspicion of an answer: "I am sorry,

however, to learn that your son has been sent to a mentalplex in Antarctica. Something to do with a troubling incident at universityplex, wasn't it? Something he once said about," he broke off with a sudden chuckle, "white men having been the first to reach the moon?"

Jeff swallowed and looked away. Ahmad's chuckle had sounded utterly cold and eerily dangerous.

"Something like that . . ." Jeff coolly replied.

He hoped that would be the end of Ahmad's questions; only it wasn't.

"Where do you suppose he picked up such a disturbing notion as that? I mean, it's not mentioned in the history of that period. Peculiar . . . to say the least."

Jeff shrugged. "I have no idea, Ahmad."

Five minutes later the hoverkraft passed beyond the buzzing hive of housing projects into open farmland. Jeff glimpsed, in the night-blackened depths, a landscape unblemished by roads, buildings, or human sprawl. Suddenly, low hills came into view, then the glimmer of Chinese moonlight upon the purpled waters of a lake. Seconds more, and the hoverkraft began a measured descent, its sleek and wingless shape gliding serenely downward.

As he watched, Jeff saw no hint of any structures surrounding the body of water, nor even a tell-tale glow of lights among the rim of forest encircling it, as surely he would have if this indeed was their final destination. But even as these new perplexities confronted him, the hoverkraft touched down upon the moon-polished surface of the lake, hardly rippling its somnolent waters. For a moment the 22nd century flying machine floated tranquilly upon the lake, surrounded only by starlit blackness and the slosh of waters lapping against its curved, tri-metal hull.

No one onboard the hoverkraft expressed any hint of concern, however, so Jeff suppressed his own confusion, lest he appear a timid fool. Perhaps this was some sort of preliminary security procedure before the hoverkraft was permitted to make for shore. But when he felt certain this must be the case, Jeff suddenly noticed the level of the lake rising upward along the curved span of window to Ahmad's left. Then, even as he continued to watch, the now foaming waters rose faster and faster in bubbling fury until they blocked out the moonlit night beyond.

They were sinking!

Jeff hadn't expected this!

Yet, his quick mind immediately deduced the probable reason: Minister Renaldo's residence must be submerged beneath the waters of the lake. It made perfect sense, he

thought. After all, what better way to conceal and protect a prominent government official from terrorist attack than to have his residence situated on the bottom of a lake.

His initial admiration for World Gov's cleverness quickly faded, however, and gave way to a different emotion—one rooted in fear. For those who took such elaborate precautions as this must also have good reason to hide. Or, perhaps more likely, good reason to conceal from sight all those who might be delivered into their midst . . .

Blackness now.

That, and the eerie glow of blue and green instrument lights shining back from the control console like distant star constellations.

A voice murmured at Jeff from out of the semi-darkness. It was Yehudit: "For one who could not have been expecting any of this, your calm reaction is quite impressive, Jeff. But then, I've long suspected you to be a man of quiet courage. Others who have journeyed this way for the first time did not react so well once we started to submerge."

"Thank you for saying so, Ahmad," Jeff responded, without much conviction. He hoped that Ahmad could not detect the thin edge of nervousness growing in him, second by second. Or was that precisely what the Commissioner of Multiculturalism was trying to do—instill a growing sense of fear in him? Jeff had good reason to wonder, certain now that Ahmad suspected—or knew—that he had commented a serious state offense by concealing his son's involvement in Nayra. Had he sat there all along, knowing more than he let on? And was Wopo officer Enrique Sovek something more than just his escort—perhaps his jail keeper and soon-to-be executioner as well?

Quiet descended again as both men slipped once more into silence. Only the steady chirp-chirp-chirp of a sensor device in the hoverkraft's control console could be heard now. Then, a sudden glow of greenish-yellow radiance filled Jeff's eyes, as the flying machine approached a submerged structure in the murky distance. A minute later he heard the metallic grind of an air-lock door sliding up—then down again—followed by the sound of water being siphoned away by powerful suction pumps.

"Welcome to Minister Renaldo's place of residence, Jeff," Ahmad Yehudit announced as he rose heavily from his seat.

Jeff rose as well beside the big man.

"I had no idea anyone on Earth lived at this level of—" Jeff started to say, then abruptly cut himself off, suddenly aware again of where, and with whom, he was.

Ahmad chuckled deeply, completing Jeff's truncated comment with an amused but ominous glint in his eye: "Level of luxury, Jeff? Was that what you were about to say?"

"Yes," Jeff cautiously admitted.

"Ah, a man that dares speak his mind," Ahmad replied, the smile on his brown-skinned face as brittle as glass. Only, this time, it didn't sound like a compliment—but a warning.

"It's just a bit of a shock," Jeff weakly confessed.

And a bitter one at that, he thought, as they passed from the dripping air-lock into a long, brightly-lit corridor. Seconds later, Ahmad and his entourage emerged into a resplendent chamber filled with beautiful oriental statues set amid the murmuring waters of a fountain. As they passed by the fountain, Jeff noticed orange-gold koi shimmering beneath waxy-green lily pads; further on, rich Chinese tapestries of brilliant crimson and gold hung from teakwood-paneled walls, elegant backdrop to the jasmine-scented air suffusing the room.

Yet, the oriental ambiance quickly gave way to garish examples of post-Unification Mexican pottery, intermingled with bony-figured African statuary. All, of course, well in keeping with the victorious multicultural egalitarianism of World Gov.

Passing onward, Ahmad Yehudit's entourage entered another, much larger room, this one filled with elegantly attired guests. To Jeff's eyes, they were every bit as exotic as the myriad platters of strange foods floating through the room—ferried about on the extended arms of several uniformed members of the Young Mentally Challenged Corps. Jeff couldn't help but notice how their eyes, as vacant as their dimwitted smiles, stood in stark contrast to the sharp, glittering laughter of their powerful masters.

Yes . . . Jeff thought.

Masters.

For no other word quite fit the nakedly obvious relationship between those being served—and those doing the serving. Here was unabashed privilege, Jeff realized, of a kind he had never suspected existed. Once, yes, in that bygone era of his grandparents. Yet, to suddenly discover it here—hidden at the bottom of this night-blackened lake while millions starved or were sentenced to death inside World Gov euth-chambers—was an unmitigated obscenity.

Jeff turned as a platter, loaded with deliciously fragrant food, suddenly poised itself in front of him.

"Go on, Jeff," Ahmad prodded, taking a delicacy for himself. Popping it nimbly into his mouth, he consumed it with a savoring contortion of thick, camel-like lips.

Under Yehudit's careful scrutiny, Jeff slowly reached for one of the unfamiliar delicacies, sliding the morsel hesitantly into his mouth. Despite feelings of guilt over the sight of so much available food, he found himself devouring the offering with surprising



relish. Whatever it was, it was incredibly satisfying. Spontaneously, Jeff found himself reaching for another, just as the platter began to move away. That too he gobbled down, rather ashamed at himself for his lack of restraint. It was simply that he had never eaten such delicious tasting food in all his life, nor known of its existence. He wondered, with ever growing resentment, when the last time anyone in the room had actually been compelled by hunger to pop down a tablet of Nomo-Hunga.

As if sensing Jeff's thoughts, Ahmad snared two long-stemmed glasses of champagne from a passing tray and passed one to the skoolplex administrator beside him, commenting affably, "Let's circulate you about the guests, Jeff. Really, you must meet some of them. After all, it's not everyday they get the opportunity to encounter the recipient of an Outstanding Citizen Award."

As they moved about the glittering room, Ahmad introduced Jeff to a great many of the guests, all important government people. Standing before each one in turn, Jeff felt their eyes momentarily alight upon the shiny medal pinned to his chest, as if they were looking, with barely concealed satisfaction, upon the yoke encircling the neck of a dumb animal. Finally understanding the true nature of their glances—that of master to beast—Jeff felt suddenly sickened by it all.

As for Ahmad, he seemed to take especial delight in showing him off, as if he had leashed a strange and exotic creature for the entertainment of all. And, in a way, Jeff was indeed such a creature, for he was the only white person evident in the spacious room. For all others present were but various shades of brown, like a single photographic image of a muddied face smeared across his field of vision.

As Ahmad escorted him from group to group, it quickly became clear to Jeff that he was looked upon as a curious racial oddity, obediently subdued for their amusement.

"Something troubling you, Jeff?"

"It's just that I hadn't expected this."

"Expected what?"

"This kind of," he glanced about the room, "special privilege." And too, hadn't he also sensed a current of racial hatred towards him, buried just below the surface of every smiling, brown face?

"Forgive me for saying so, Jeff, but it's obvious that you still suffer from a rather provincial attitude when it comes to the philosophy of power," Ahmad intoned, speaking between generous sips of champagne. "Such rules as World Gov deems appropriate for the majority of society do not necessarily suit the needs of us all."

"Don't they?" Jeff replied. He couldn't see it that way. He couldn't understand one

selfish, privileged bit of it. And the sweet taste of genuine champagne upon his lips only served to make him even more resentful by the minute.

“Ah, Jeff . . . certainly a man possessed of your educational background can see the reason behind it all. World Gov must maintain a certain flexibility of action for certain members of the government even while it retains the illusion of inviolate uniformity among the masses.”

“Why?”

For an instant something black and dangerous flickered across Ahmad Yehudit’s eyes, as if Jeff’s question were a sudden affront to the universe itself. “Why?” Ahmad echoed. “Simply because humanity operates on two levels and always has. When one understands that—one very nearly understands everything.”

Jeff remained silent, examining the obscene luxury surrounding him—the priceless artworks, the elegantly attired guests, the no-thought-for-tomorrow hedonism.

“Tell me something, Jeff. Have you truly believed, all these years, that the leaders of World Gov actually lived like the rest of humanity?” There was a faint little twist of contempt on the Commissioner of Multiculturalism’s lips, as if he were waiting for the punchline to an obscene joke he had heard a thousand times before.

“I’ll tell you what I did believe, Ahmad. I believed our leaders ate Nomo-Hunga just like the rest of us, sharing the burden of famine equally. Now I realize it was all a lie, every time this leader or that was shown on the news popping a Nomo-Hunga into his mouth.” Jeff glanced forlornly at the guests, all engaged in savoring every exquisite morsel their greedy fingers could reach. “And it was a lie that worked, since only the rare individual like me ever gets the chance to see the truth.”

“Go on, Jeff . . .”

“Call me a fool if you want, but all my life I’ve believed in World Gov’s proclamations of social justice, moral responsibility, and racial equality—and I thought our leaders did as well.”

Ahmad laughed richly and much too loudly, the sound deep and mocking. “Oh, Jeff, Jeff, Jeff . . . you mean you couldn’t see through it all?”

When Jeff failed to answer, the Commissioner of Multiculturalism’s heavy-lidded eyes looked out over the vast room. “Like you, I too was long misled about the true nature of humanity. I too believed in human equality, at least of the spirit, if nothing else. But coming to World Gov finally opened my eyes and rid me of such youthful illusions. I learned that there is only so much food, so much power, and so much happiness to go around—and that some of us are far better suited to having a greater share than others.”

“How convenient,” Jeff softly replied, “that your newfound philosophy and all of this privilege go so neatly hand in hand.”

“I had no choice but to alter my way of thinking,” Ahmad replied, gesturing a fat, meaty hand at the party guests. “Just like everyone else in this room, I too came to understand that suffering is the inevitable fate of mankind. It was true long before the Unification ever came into being—and it remains true now. And there is absolutely nothing any of us can do about it.”

“That’s not exactly the gospel according to World Gov, Ahmad. Nor what we teach our children in skoolplex.”

Ahmad shook his massive head in sad amusement. “No, it isn’t, is it Jeff? Don’t you see? The dream and the reality of World Gov will never be one and the same. And because it cannot be, we dare not let the greater mass of humanity ever know it. Otherwise, nineteen billion people would revolt and our entire world would collapse.”

Jeff shuddered, turning away.

Was it possible that the almighty leaders of World Gov had finally given up hope of ever salvaging humanity? That the noble ideal of human brotherhood was no more than a carefully-tended illusion? This seemed to be what Ahmad was hinting at. That, despite the annihilation of the white race, racism still existed amongst those who remained. That, despite the obliteration of capitalism, hunger and poverty still lived on. That, despite the state-imposed philosophy of egalitarianism, opportunistic privilege continued to thrive. Yet, if all hope of a racially-blended, socialistic utopia was really and truly gone, then what in Buddha’s name had all the sacrifice been for, all the millions executed in government euth-chambers, all the years of Nomo-Hunga? In the end—all the crowded, bleak, horror of it all?

Ahmad laid a fleshy hand upon Jeff’s shoulder, like a clam closing silently over its prey. “Are you not beginning to see the reason for all of this?”

Staring blankly into his drink, Jeff offered no reply; for some strange reason, his head felt suddenly dizzy. And when he finally looked up again, all the faces around him seemed to be melting. Ahmad himself remained quiet and attentive, watching him with the steady, implacable eyes of a watchmaker. And now his face too was melting, running together with all the other melting faces in the room.

“My drink . . .”

Gentle, mocking laughter echoed forth from the hulking Commissioner of Multiculturalism as he slowly drifted forward, like a mountain emerging into view from a cold, gray mist. “Of course, Jeff. We drugged it. We had to. You see, we know all about

your lies, your evasions, and your half-truths. Everything. We know now what really happened that day at Johannesburg Space Port. How your son Adam joined Nayra and attempted to escape with Karl Ramstrom. And how—later on—you deliberately concealed your son's involvement, just so you could spare him from justice."

Ahmad shook his head in contemptuous regret. "You should have known the truth would come out, sooner or later. In fact, World Gov always doubted your story. But there were thousands of other traitors ahead of you who had to be investigated first, and then executed. So, it took us awhile to get around to you and your son again. And when Wopo finally did, your son proved no match for their truth drugs or," he smiled derisively, "Sovek's bare-knuckled fists."

Understanding clawed upward into Jeff's drug-clouded brain. "You filthy bastard . . ."

Enrique Sovek suddenly came up to Ahmad's side, his hand resting just beneath his jacket where his plasma gun lay concealed. A thin, greasy smile sliced across his face, like a fresh wound.

Ahmad went on: "And then there's the fact that Dr. Vladimir Zaslov paid you an unexpected visit the night before he committed suicide. We found that particularly strange, considering you did not know the man. So, we had to wonder why. Why—unless he had something he wanted to give you—something of priceless value. Something that World Gov must have at all cost."

There was a musical tinkle against the marble floor.

Almost hypnotically, Jeff looked down, his every movement now tortuously slow. At his feet lay the splintered remains of his champagne glass. Dragging his eyes upward, he noticed the room spinning round and round as his vision smeared into a thousand streaks of color. Stumbling forward, he reached out towards Ahmad's thick, gluttonous throat. "You murdered my son, didn't you . . ."

Ahmad's mouth opened into a raw, red gash. "We had no choice, Jeff. All who betray World Gov must be liquidated."

Only—Jeff's hand never reached Ahmad's throat.

For in the next instant, the green marble floor suddenly tilted upward and slammed cold, hard blackness deep into the center of his mind.



# Fourteen

*"You have not converted a man because you have silenced him."*

*— John Morley*

Jeff shrieked in jaw-grinding agony as another high-voltage shock of electric current ripped through his testicles.

"Christ and Allah! I've told you all I know!"

"Force 6."

Jeff bucked wildly, teeth clenched, his naked, pain-wracked body writhing and twisting against the restraints that held him fast.

"Please—please—please—please—!"

Insanity.

Babbling insanity.

They risked that outcome, Ahmad knew. Nevertheless, he gave the command to increase the pain factor to the next level: "Force 7."

Jeff screamed uncontrollably now, his blood-shot eyes hideous with torment.

Finally, Ahmad waved a hand towards Enrique Sovek, and the electric current ceased.

As Jeff collapsed backward into mindless convulsions, Sovek turned an eager, ferret-like face towards the hulking Commissioner. "Why did you stop me?"

Ahmad shifted his glance towards the Wopo agent. "Because I'm now convinced that Jeff Huxton has told us all he knows. He admits to having the Zaslov formula—but not the means to decode it." The Commissioner of Multiculturalism slowly turned away from the man lying on the torture slab, now mercifully unconscious. "And that, I'm afraid, makes things far more difficult for us."

Sovek, disappointed that his work had been interrupted, asked: "What now?"

"Take him away to a holding cell. Keep him there under continuous sedation until further notice."

That said, Ahmad Yehudit turned abruptly and left.

The following morning, back in Beijing, Ahmad Yehudit appeared before the High Quorum. As he addressed the august body of World Gov leaders, one part of his mind contemplated what few in the outside world knew or suspected—that catastrophic, worldwide famine was fast bearing down upon humanity.

Within two years, perhaps less, it was predicted that billions would die from global starvation, and that nothing whatsoever could be done to prevent it. Such a prediction had shaken the very foundations of World Gov, causing a near panic amongst the twelve leaders of the High Quorum. Now they were expecting the worst, and the worst was nothing less than the complete social, political, and economic disintegration of human civilization. It would be worse than a nuclear war, Ahmad knew, since massive human annihilation would not come quickly and cleanly—and then be over with. Instead, it would be one long, drawn-out nightmare of ever-escalating and dehumanizing horror.

The only question remaining was this: how would the ruling elite escape the savage retribution of the masses once their shining Utopia came tumbling down? And the only answer the High Quorum had thus far been able to come up with was grim indeed: they would not escape. For once the masses revolted, the very halls of World Gov would be stormed by wave after wave of righteous fury, until every well-fed bureaucrat was hunted down, seized, and dragged into the teeming streets of Beijing to be mauled and exterminated by the starving multitudes. Afterward, their battered, defiled bodies would be heaped onto growing mountains of famine victims that would only rise higher and higher as global starvation encircled the planet.

Only, Ahmad Yehudit did not wish to be one of those bodies. Nor, for that matter, did the members of the High Quorum. Every last one of them wanted to go on living the lives they had long been accustomed to—the lives of well-fed, pleasure-seeking, pampered rulers in a world long ruled by the satisfying lie of racial and social equality.

Time was running out, however. Already, massive famine had begun to sweep across the teeming heart of central Africa. And this time, Ahmad realized, it would not be stopped. Even so, the world's factories remained busy churning out millions upon millions of hunger-suppressing Nomo-Hunga tablets, shipping them out every hour on the hour to every famine-ravaged zone in the world—hoping to lull the starving populations into believing that real food shipments were on the way, at least long enough until the military could move in and spray them with lethal Xylexx gas.

Yes, the end of World Gov was fast approaching, Ahmad Yehudit knew. And when it finally arrived, the multicultural dream of worldwide racial and economic equality would at long last be realized—at least in the grave . . .

Only, Ahmad Yehudit wanted no such equality as that.

He just wanted to live.

“We then submitted the subject to a Force 7 interrogation,” Yehudit went on as he paced back and forth in front of the High Quorum, “and determined that he did, in fact, have the scientific information we were after. Unfortunately, we also discovered that Dr. Zaslov’s research data had been converted to datacules, a process developed on Mars that makes it impossible for us to extract and decode.”

“Do you mean to say,” High Quorum member Reinhardt Ke’elikolani shot back, “that Zaslov’s stardrive research is now beyond our reach?”

“As it presently stands, I’m afraid so. For without a datacule decoder, World Gov has no way to retrieve Zaslov’s research from the prisoner. And without Zaslov’s research, we have no way of building a starship capable of reaching Alpha Centauri.”

Upon hearing that, the High Quorum broke out in sudden, excited discussion, leaving Ahmad Yehudit momentarily alone with his thoughts. In all truth, he thoroughly enjoyed the sensation his report was creating amongst these ageing, calcified leaders of World Gov. After all, had it not been at his urging alone that Zaslov had been kept under close observation these past few months, knowing how he was fast approaching a scientific breakthrough in the development of his stardrive—a development that offered World Gov its one and only chance of escaping a worldwide meltdown of human civilization?

For Ahmad Yehudit knew the full truth: just two years before the Unification had swept the world, a planet orbiting Alpha Centauri had been detected by deep space probe. Though semi-arid, it was nonetheless blessed with a warm, life-bearing sea, nestled beneath an oxygen-rich atmosphere. Its unexpected discovery had finally provided long-sought proof that the universe offered interstellar sanctuary to humanity—if humanity could but reach it, Ahmad knew. Now, it possibly could—with the help of the Zaslov stardrive.

A moment later Ahmad refocused his mind on the High Quorum as another of its members turned in his direction and spoke: “So, what is to be done, Commissioner Yehudit?”

“As I see it, we have only one choice left to us,” Ahmad replied, bringing all eyes back to him. “We must secure an Avalon datacule decoder at all cost.”

There was a sudden sputter of voices, before one emerged above the rest: “Are you seriously suggesting . . . ?”

“I am, Minister Bokassa. In fact, I propose we mount an immediate military



expedition to Mars. According to Global Defense, we have seven ships remaining in our space fleet still capable of making the journey. Qualified crews will be harder to come by, but not impossible. Colonel Lwanga has informed me he can assemble five thousand Unification troops capable of infiltrating Avalon Colony through underground service tunnels. The assault will be bloody, with a great many casualties on both sides. But Lwanga is confident we can take Avalon.”

A chill silence fell over the gathered members of the High Quorum. For a moment, their collective stares seemed to turn inward, as if they were seeing backward into the past—a past filled with dark truths that had long ago been hidden from the greater mass of humanity. Truths that, even now, had never been totally buried. Nor would they ever be, so long as one place still existed—Avalon.

Avalon . . .

The only Martian colony to survive the aftermath of the Unification—and the last refuge of the white race. A refuge the Unification had long ago failed to exterminate. For in the years since, as worldwide racial interbreeding steadily brought down the global IQ average to its lowest level, the means to maintain legions of scientific and technical individuals capable of sustaining space travel had slowly slipped from World Gov’s dark-skinned grasp.

As a result, only a handful of people remained alive who were capable of understanding the complex operation of a fusion-powered space vessel. But even their numbers were fast dwindling, as time and racial interbreeding continued to level out the last alpine peaks of Euro-ethnic intelligence.

Yet, none of these dark truths were ever talked about, even amongst the ruling elite. After all, the Unification had never been about serving Man’s highest capabilities—it had been about subjugating the technologically-superior West to the will of the common, the mediocre, and—above all—the dark-skinned. A century later, it had all but achieved its goal.

Yet, Avalon remained . . .

Even now, World Gov knew little about the long-silent Martian colony, other than the fact that a small fraction of the white race still survived there. How they survived remained a mystery, for no Earth ships had journeyed to that dusty red world since the Unification had seized global power.

Then, during the long years that followed, as the Unification consolidated its multicultural grip over the entire world, the High Quorum eventually came to turn its all-seeing eyes outward, towards that distant red orb. Realizing that a dangerous nest of whites still remained out there, unyoked by multiculturalism and racial egalitarianism,

the rulers of World Gov finally decided the time had come to burn them out, once and for all.

Thus, with that purpose in mind, the High Quorum ordered the launching of twenty-five high-yield nuclear warheads towards the renegade Martian colony, then quietly sat back and waited for victory.

Only—victory never came. For somewhere deep in space, all twenty-five Unification missiles were intercepted and destroyed by a counterforce of Avalon missiles, leaving the colony and its white inhabitants alone and untouched, there upon the red Martian sands . . .

After that, World Gov never again attempted to destroy Avalon. For one thing, it was far too busy subjugating a world of its own, wiping out the final vestiges of free-market capitalism as it quietly ushered the last survivors of white humanity towards extinction.

And so the years passed . . .

As they did, a long and foreboding silence gradually enveloped the lost colony of Avalon. Over time, a fervent hope grew amongst the leaders of World Gov that Avalon had somehow been extinguished, perhaps through some sort of natural disaster such as plague, a meteor strike, or the critical failure of its delicate life-support systems.

Then, when this belief came to seem all but a certainty, the first Avalon agents began to appear on Earth. They came with but one purpose in mind: to seek out Earth's last remaining whites and return with them to Avalon. Quickly swinging into action, Wopo liquidated every Avalon agent as they found them, but only after subjecting them to days of brutal interrogation and torture.

Only—the Avalons kept coming.

Then, for a time, the High Quorum toyed with the idea of rounding up all remaining whites on Earth and transporting them to a remote military site and gassing them. Proposed as a “necessary security measure” against future Avalon incursions, it came within a hair's breadth of actually being implemented. But at the last moment, it was discovered that a large proportion of World Gov's top scientific staff happened to be comprised of non-blended whites, and so the liquidation plan was hastily rescinded.

Humiliated by this disclosure—and its frightening racial implications—the High Quorum ordered the immediate execution of the member who had initially suggested the idea, citing him as “a threat to the world state.”

Now Ahmad Yehudit, Commissioner of Multiculturalism, stood before the High Quorum proposing yet another radical and frightening idea: a military expedition to the

long-forbidden world of Mars.

“It’s our last option,” Ahmad contended, coming forward and meeting the collective stare of the High Quorum. “We have only two years left, perhaps less, before worldwide famine destroys this planet. If there is any chance at all of decoding Dr. Zaslov’s stardrive research in time to build a starship capable of reaching Alpha Centauri, then we must not hesitate to act.”

For a long moment, the members of the High Quorum remained silent in the face of Ahmad Yehudit’s grim pronouncement. Then, gradually, their silence thawed as they remembered again the teeming masses that would tear them to bloody shreds, once global rule and order collapsed.

Finally, after a brief discussion amongst his fellow Quorum members, a man of withered countenance leaned forward. Yellowish-skinned and wrinkled, his coarse white hair was his only distinguishing feature. Racially intermixed with African, Asian, and European blood, he looked down at Ahmad Yehudit with contemptuous eyes, as if he could barely stand the sight of him. “Very well, Commissioner Yehudit. We of the High Quorum hereby sanction your expedition to Mars. Assemble whatever military personnel and equipment you require to carry out your mission.”

“It will be done, Minister Patascsek.”

“One other thing, Commissioner . . .”

“Yes, your Eminence?”

“Make absolutely certain no one in Avalon Colony survives. Not a man, not a woman,” he slowly drew back into shadow, his eyes narrowing to slits, “not a child.”



# Fifteen

*"God cannot alter the past, though historians can."*

— *Samuel Butler*

Twelve days later, Jeff Huxton awoke in the cold depths of space, somewhere along the desolate road between Earth and Mars. Ahmad Yehudit was standing over him when he regained consciousness, staring gently down as Jeff's blue eyes fluttered open.

"I'm afraid you won't be able to speak for a few moments, Jeff. That is, not until the hibernation drug wears off."

But he could still hate, Jeff thought, straining to rise from the transparent unit surrounding his drug-numbed body. And right now, Yehudit was as good as anyone to focus that hate upon.

"Have you any idea where you are?" the hulking Commissioner of Multiculturalism inquired, glancing about the hibernation chamber at dozens of other containment units, now all but empty of their occupants.

Jeff pushed himself up into a sitting position, but found his muscular control still wobbly and uncertain.

"Ah, perhaps not . . ." Yehudit sympathized, turning back to the sandy-haired man. "Unfortunately, you're in for something of a shock." To emphasize his point, Yehudit strode over to a metal-surfaced wall and activated a six-foot-wide monitor. An instant later the magnified image of a rust-red planet bloomed into view, burnished by the bright light of the fast dwindling sun.

Jeff's eyes widened in awe, realizing in one glance that he was no longer on Earth.

"We're still several weeks away from entering Mars orbit," Yehudit pleasantly explained, "so there's ample time for you to reacquaint yourself with the living."

Keeping an eye fixed on Yehudit, Jeff slowly pulled himself free of the hibernation capsule and stood upright. As he did, a tangled lock of hair fell across his forehead, casting one blue eye into shadow. "If you're referring to men like you," Jeff croaked, "I'd rather reacquaint myself with the dead."

Remaining noncommittal, Ahmad walked over to a recessed wall panel and pressed

it. As it hummed aside, several dozen one-piece garments, arrayed in various colors and materials, were revealed. "I'm sure you'll find something suitable here to wear. There's also a selection of footwear. And over there, next to that machine, you'll find a shower unit. After you're refreshed and dressed, please report to Conference Room K-5 down Corridor 9. Just follow the direction indicators along the way."

Moving towards the exit, Yehudit paused for a moment as the door hummed aside. "Really, Jeff . . . all this was quite necessary. So, if you're bitter or angry about your circumstances, please let me assure you that everything will be made right by journey's end. After all, you once assured me of your loyalty to World Gov. Now, you have one final chance to prove it."

Before Jeff could offer a reply, the Commissioner of Multiculturalism turned and left.

After showering, Jeff donned a tan and gray jumpsuit, then made his way down to Deck 5 of the massive solarship, following the glowing direction indicators along the way. Once there, he searched out Conference Room K-5, where he found Ahmad Yehudit, Wopo officer Enrique Sovek, and a dozen other people calmly awaiting his arrival.

"Well, here I am," Jeff announced, coming to a halt at the head of an oval-shaped conference table, "freshly scrubbed and dressed to government specifications. So, what's in store for me now—more torture?" Looking around at the gathered faces, Jeff's eyes glittered with contempt.

Ahmad glanced obliquely at the others, as if to silently caution them not to react in any undue manner, for this was to be expected, after all.

"Well?" Jeff demanded, leaning forward on the table.

"Please, Jeff. Won't you have a seat?" Ahmad politely intoned.

Jeff let go a sigh of disgust. "You're quite the reasonable one at the moment, aren't you Ahmad?"

"I assure you everything will be made clear, if you'll be seated."

"You mean, like it was 'made clear' when you ordered me strapped to a torture table? Like that, Ahmad?" Jeff laughed. "You see, until now I had never believed the ugly rumors behind World Gov. I thought it was all just filthy propaganda muttered by a few malcontents. But now I know better, don't I Ahmad? Now I know that being a dedicated skoolplex administrator, a selfless family man, and an obedient citizen doesn't mean much to men like you—especially if we get in the way of your plans. In the end, all your kind ever wanted was a global-wide herd of human sheep to rule over—all bleating mindlessly at the altar of World Gov. Oh, you got a real loyal citizen in me, gentlemen."

How easily I was led along by you and your noble lies of racial equality and human brotherhood and—" Jeff choked back a sudden rush of self-contempt, too humiliated to go on.

"Jeff," Ahmad reasoned delicately, "you've been brought along on this mission for a very special reason: World Gov needs your assistance in helping avert a possible Nayra attack against Earth. Even now Avalon Colony is planning to—"

"You and your mission can go to straight to hell."

Sovek leapt from his chair and grabbed Jeff by the throat, shoving him backward with jarring ferocity. "Keep your dirty mouth shut you godless freak!"

Yehudit rose to his feet, visibly flustered. "Take him away," he whispered. "Get him out of my sight."

After a savage hour of beating at the hands of Sovek and two other Wopo officers, Jeff came to an unknown time later, lying face down on a cold metal floor.

"Either cooperate or they're going to kill you. I'd hate to see that happen."

Jeff groaned, attempting to turn his head in the direction of the female voice. A dark chuckle slithered out from between bruised lips: "Oh, really? You could have fooled me . . ."

"Please, listen to me. If you don't cooperate you won't live to see another day, much less reach Mars. Commissioner Yehudit has just been informed by Dr. Mizuguchi that he can surgically drain and store your blood and then decipher it later, once we acquire a datacube decoder. Your only value to them alive is as a lure. You see, they want Karl Ramstrom and if Ramstrom knows you have Zaslov's stardrive research, it might draw him out into the open. As for myself, I have my own reasons for wanting you kept alive . . ."

Pushing himself up to his hands and knees, Jeff turned in the direction of the voice. Much to his surprise, it belonged to a blonde-haired, fair-skinned woman, perhaps ten years younger than himself. Examining her further, he saw that she wore the silver-gray uniform of a World Gov air force officer, her left breast emblazoned with the gold insignia of a Major. Two eyes, violet-blue in color, stared back at him.

"And what reasons are those?" Jeff grunted.

"I'm not here to interrogate you, if that's what you think."

"Then why are you here—to amuse yourself?"

"I just wanted to check up on your condition."

“Well, you’ve checked. Now leave me alone.”

“Listen. I know that Sovek is a brutal man, even by Wopo standards. Left to him, he would have killed you that night at Zhanzao Lake Interrogation Center.”

Slowly, Jeff rose to his feet, bracing his back against the wall. “Who are you, anyway?”

“Susan Kreitzler—commander of this ship.”

A momentary cloud of confusion passed over Jeff’s face. “Did you say Zhanzao Lake Interrogation Center . . . ?”

“Yes.”

“So that’s what they call their little funhouse of horrors . . .”

“Seriously, were you not aware that Wopo operated such facilities?”

Jeff chuckled weakly, moving carefully to a chair and sitting down. “Dumb as this may sound, I always thought World Gov was ruled by men of kindness and wisdom—not terrorist thugs who ran secret underwater torture chambers.”

Major Kreitzler nodded regretfully. “It may not mean anything to you, Mr. Huxton, but I’m sorry you got tangled up in this matter.”

Jeff said nothing and looked away.

“I understand you’re a skoolplex administrator. And before that, a teacher.”

“If you want to call indoctrinating young minds with the lies of World Gov ‘teaching,’ be my guest.”

“What lies?”

Jeff’s eyes shifted into the distance. “Oh, just lies. Rotten, filthy little lies that nobody cares about anymore. Lies that helped carry out World Gov’s racial harmony programs at the expense of historical truth.”

Jeff shook his head in sad remembrance. “Oh yes, they were all lies . . . Still, I tried to see the good behind it all so I played the game for years and years, no questions asked. You see, the sociological theory went something like this: If you teach enough young, malleable minds that every race and culture has contributed equally to world civilization, then you could eventually destroy racism and any given race’s claim to superiority over another—no matter what the truth. So yes . . . I went along. I taught the lies. I kept my mouth shut. Until one day—”

“Yes?”

Jeff swallowed thickly. “Until one day my son finally made me realize that wiping



out the separate races might have been a tragic mistake.”

“How so?”

Jeff sighed. “It’s only common sense, when you think about it. I mean, you just can’t mix up white, black, brown, and yellow people into one gigantic racial porridge without destroying their individual identities and cultures. Take black people, for instance. Before the Unification, they had a bond to Africa, because that is where their ancestors, languages, cultures, and history originated. But the average man of the 22nd century isn’t black anymore. Today, he’s just as much white and brown and yellow as he is black. He’s all of them and yet he’s none of them. Because of that, he’s got no special bond to Africa anymore, or for that matter, to Europe or to Asia. He comes from all those places now, and yet, none of them. He’s the Tan Everyman, Major. He’s what the Unification fought to achieve—and finally did.”

A dark smile crossed Jeff’s lips. “And if I had a better sense of humor, I’d laugh right now. Because the great rallying cry of the multiculturalists back then was ‘cultural diversity.’ Everywhere you looked, everything you read, saw, or heard spoken about had that as a common theme. And yet, that’s exactly what they destroyed on Earth—diversity. Today, there is no cultural diversity anywhere on Earth—just one global-wide, monolithic way of life—all held fast under the all-seeing eye of World Gov. Today, there is no racial diversity anywhere on Earth—just one common shade of tan for all of us. True, that shade of tan might vary a bit from individual to individual, but these minor imperfections won’t upset World Gov’s overall plan for world domination. It’s already here, in fact, and if a few of us don’t quite fit in, we’ll be taken care of over time.” Jeff lowered his eyes. “Just like my son Adam was taken care of . . .”

“That’s something I don’t understand,” Susan said. “I mean, why did we whites ever allow it to happen . . . ?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I’ll ever know. But what I do know is that the multiculturalists destroyed racial diversity, and when that went right along with it went national diversity, followed by economic, social, and political diversity. It was a package deal, you see, and whites more than anyone else bought into it. That is, until some of them finally realized the dark truth—that cultural diversity was nothing more than a sugar-coated suicide pill intended to wipe out the white race. Only, by then, it was too late.”

Susan lowered her eyes for a moment, pondering Jeff’s words. Then, looking up again, she said: “You’re quite the historian, Mr. Huxton.”

Jeff nodded ruefully. “Just a lousy habit of mine, I suppose—sticking my nose into the past. That is, the past that really existed, not the one World Gov tinkered together.”

“And what have you learned from it all?”

“Learned? Very little, except that human history has been one long, broken-hearted struggle. One that I’m not sure was worth it.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I say it because the world remains a place of human misery and failed ideals, the Unification being only the latest example.” Jeff glanced forlornly into the distance. “Only, I’m afraid that this time the damage can’t be undone . . .”

Susan smiled. “You really are a heretic. I’m surprised World Gov never put you in a mentalplex.”

“I managed to escape that fate. Unfortunately, my son didn’t. In the world that World Gov made, he was never able to accept himself. That’s because his kind wasn’t wanted any-more—and he knew it. In the end, he lost his life simply because he didn’t fit in anymore.” Jeff slowly raised his eyes to the beautiful Wopo officer. “And neither do you or I.”

Susan turned and gazed out the star-filled port on the far wall. “Has it been hard for you, being different?”

Jeff shrugged, glancing down at the reflection of his face in the surface of a table. “I live with it.”

Hearing the whispered pain in his voice, Susan suddenly turned and came over to him, sitting at his side. “So do I, Jeff. With every breath I take.”

Jeff looked up at the sound of his first name. It had been a long time since anyone had spoken it with such feeling. It felt good, in a sad, distant sort of way. “I don’t understand—”

“Don’t you? Can’t you see I’m just like you? Can’t you understand that I’ve never been happy about who and what I am either? As a child, I almost lost the will to go on living once I realized how different I was from other people. Thankfully, my parents helped me get through those difficult times.”

“I went through the same thing, growing up in Australia.”

“Is that where you first learned the truth about the Unification?”

Cautiously, Jeff nodded. “It’s something I don’t like talking about . . . my youth . . . and the years I spent growing up in Melbourne—”

“Melbourne?”

“Mandelabourne, I guess it’s called now. Anyway, during my youth there, I met an

old man who'd lived during the years before the Unification. One day, he told me where to find a secret cache of data disks made just before World Gov seized global power. After reading through them, I finally understood the terrible events that led up to the Unification—events that are not spoken of today in any skoolplex on Earth."

"What events, Jeff?"

Jeff hesitated. "Forgive me, but even now it's hard for me to speak of them."

Reaching over, Susan gently took hold of Jeff's hand. "Please—tell me."

Swallowing, Jeff thought back to that long-ago day he'd spent inside the ruined depths of Kooroora Space Port, remembering again the long decades of multicultural propaganda that had systematically undermined Western civilization, until it finally collapsed under the weight of lies. Once demoralized, it only remained for a cabal of hardened multicultural fanatics to sweep in and seize the world. Afterward, the horrors began: the round-up of every white who resisted the Unification, the concentration camps, the mass executions. As for those whites that chose to submit, the twin edicts of egalitarianism and racial equality were never again to be questioned . . .

"Jeff . . . ?"

Jeff looked up, his eyes haunted with memories. "Believe me, what you were taught about the Unification never happened. America and Europe never willingly united with the Afro-Asian Alliance, as World Gov claims."

"But our leaders—"

"Sold us out. You see, after decades of feeding us multicultural propaganda, they believed no white anywhere would dare resist a world government led by non-whites. Most didn't resist, but not all. For those who did, they were denounced as racists and immediately rounded up by Unification forces. Most of them later died in concentration camps, brutally murdered by their new African and Asian masters—masters that our own multicultural-indoctrinated white politicians willingly delivered us to."

"That's horrible."

"It was worse than horrible—it was genocide. And because it was genocide, World Gov had no other choice but to rewrite history to cover up what really happened. It worked. Let me tell you, it worked. How do I know? Because most people today deny that a systematic holocaust against whites ever happened. Those that even dare suggest it took place are immediately arrested and locked up inside a state-run mentalplex."

"I've heard that story too but never believed it," Susan said. "After all, it's not taught in skoolplex. So, just like everyone else, I always thought it was just a lie made up by Nayra terrorists in order to justify their violent acts against the government."

“Oh, it’s true all right. I saw the evidence for myself. Even so, I was never able to convince my second wife that World Gov’s version of history was a complete fabrication. Whenever I attempted to, she threatened to turn me in to Wopo.” Jeff chuckled darkly over the memory. “Just shows you what a lousy teacher I must have been.”

Susan looked down at her hands. “You’ve been married twice?”

“Yes. My first wife was a Skintone 1, just like me. She was killed during a race riot years ago, while protesting against government discrimination against whites.”

Susan looked up. “But race riots and discrimination aren’t supposed to exist anymore.”

“Try telling that to the grave of my dead wife,” Jeff said, looking sullenly at the floor. “And while you’re at it, try telling it to all the whites of the past who helped pave the way for this brave new world of ‘racial equality.’”

“And your second wife . . . ?”

Jeff looked up again. “She was a Skintone 5. Neither too light nor too dark, but just right.” Jeff let go a vicious grin. “The government ideal.”

“And that marriage . . . ?”

“Ended in divorce.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. We were never right for each other. And now, considering the present predicament I’m in, it’s just as well she’s gone.”

Susan reached out a hand and touched Jeff on the wrist. “If you cooperate with Commissioner Yehudit there may be a chance for you to begin a new life elsewhere.”

Jeff shook his head. “In case you’ve forgotten, my son’s been murdered. And back on Earth, my daughter is undergoing euthanasia training in order to kill people our glorious World Gov can no longer feed. Then there’s my ex-wife, a sour memory that will haunt me for years to come. Finally, there’s the fact that I’m finished as a skoolplex administrator because I just can’t go on serving the Big Lie anymore.”

“But it doesn’t have to be, Jeff.”

“Unfortunately, I think it does. You see, I can no longer help men like Ahmad Yehudit and World Gov carry on their vicious dream.”

“What if there’s something in it for you?”

Jeff looked curiously at Major Kreitzler. “What are you talking about?”

“Ahmad could kill you, and he just might yet. But if he can gain your complete

cooperation he'd rather not."

"And what price is he willing to pay for that cooperation?"

"Maybe a new life out on Mars . . ."

Jeff started to speak, then fell silent again.

Susan went on: "During our preflight briefing, Commissioner Yehudit explained that World Gov wants to establish a military presence out on Mars, once that planet is under the jurisdiction of Earth again. Later, he spoke to me privately. He explained that World Gov will need skilled individuals with a proven record of loyalty to staff a new colony out there, once our mission to Avalon is complete. I'm one of those Yehudit has selected for that duty."

"Where do I fit in?"

"You're a teacher with many years of experience, aren't you? A new World Gov colony on Mars will need skilled individuals like you."

Jeff rose from his chair and walked over to the vu-port, looking out. A billion glittering stars shone back at him, along with one bright, red point of light—Mars.

"Go on."

"I want to accept Commissioner Yehudit's offer. But there remains one obstacle . . ."

"Which is?"

Susan turned two violet-blue eyes towards him. "Loneliness, Jeff."

Slowly, Jeff turned around.

"Last month I turned thirty-four," Susan quietly explained, "yet, I've never been married. As you can see, it's not for want of looks. Nor was it ever a lack of offers. I just never met the right man, I suppose . . ."

"Why not—too busy sacrificing your life to World Gov?"

Susan smiled. "That was certainly part of it."

"And the rest?"

"In my work, I often have to fly supply missions into famine zones. Over the years, I've seen a lot of things I wish I hadn't. Once, my aircraft was trapped on a Central American runway by hungry mobs desperate for food." She looked away, her eyes haunted. "After they attacked our aircraft with rocks and clubs, we had to open fire on them with our plasma guns in order to escape. Before it was over, we burned down over nine hundred men, women, and children."

Jeff remained silent, unmoving.

She looked back at him. "It's an ugly world we've made, and I've done my best to survive in it. I imagine you have too. But I don't want to share what little private life I have with someone who's seen the things I have, which is almost every man I work with."

"I understand."

Susan studied him for a moment. "I really think you do, Jeff. Maybe that's why I saw in you something I recognized in my own self. That same sense of loneliness. A loneliness for something you once wanted, but never found. Maybe a longing for an ideal that you once dreamt of, and never reached."

Jeff looked away for a moment, thinking not of himself, but of a single pillar of flame rising into a hot African sky.

Susan came over to him. "Whatever it is, I can't find it back on Earth any longer, if I ever could. That's why I want to accept Commissioner Yehudit's offer. For me, it's a chance at a new life." She lowered her eyes. "And maybe . . . for you as well."

Not knowing what to say, Jeff turned away and slowly walked across the cabin. Then, turning back around, he looked again at the beautiful woman facing him. How lovely she was, he thought. Lovelier than any woman he had ever known.

As if reading his thoughts, Susan took a tentative step towards him. "Jeff, let me be very honest with you. I could learn to love a man like you. Ever since I first saw you, I knew you were different. For one thing, I know you've never been a happy man. But I think you long to be, somewhere, somehow. What's more, I think I could be the woman to make you happy."

Jeff knew that she was right—that he'd never been happy. Even now, he wondered if it were still possible to him.

"Why would you even want someone like me?" Jeff asked. "I'm forty-nine, going gray, and can't even keep myself out of trouble." He managed a faint smile. "Besides, I don't know a damn thing about being a Martian colonist."

"You wouldn't have to know anything, Jeff. We'll learn as we go along. And with the resources of World Gov behind us, we can tame a new world."

"But only if I cooperate with Ahmad . . ."

Susan nodded. "It's the only way."

Yes, Jeff thought—the only way.

But could it be his way?

As he momentarily pondered that, he regarded the woman before him, realizing now that she must have fought the same battle as he had to win acceptance in a world of

swarming brown humanity. Two kindred souls, he realized. The Adam and Eve—not of a living race—but of a dying one.

The bitter irony of it all suddenly struck him.

Like the last two passenger pigeons, what meaning could his and Susan's love for each other have now? What purpose would it serve, if at the end of it all their Race perished upon the windswept plains of extinction? For even if Susan bore him children, they too would be overrun like the last poppies of summer by the brown weeds of autumn . . .

But even if that were so, Jeff yearned to hold Susan in that moment, to press her pale flesh against his own, to feel for one instant out of eternity a racial bond with her. And this time, he wanted to feel that emotion without acknowledging any taint of evil, as World Gov would have wanted them to. And yet, some inner sense of guilt (or was it self-hatred?) still held him back.

Sensing his hesitation, Susan reached out the fingertips of a hand and gently touched his face. "We could build a new life—together."

Jeff looked away. "Could we?"

"Don't you want to go on living?"

"I'm not so sure anymore."

"Jeff, you mustn't go on thinking like that. I want you to live. I've wanted that from the first moment I saw you. Because this time I know I've finally found what I've always wanted in a man. For me, you were the first bright pebble on the long, lonely beach of my life. That's why I'm here."

Jeff looked back at her, uncertainty in his eyes.

"All you have to do," Susan urged, "is convince Commissioner Yehudit that you'll give him no further trouble."

"You mean he's already agreed to this arrangement?"

"Not yet. In fact, he doesn't even know about it. But if he can be assured of your absolute cooperation on this mission, he'll let you come with me. I'm certain of it."

Jeff shook his head. "Don't you understand? Ahmad murdered my son. Or have you forgotten that?"

"And he'll kill you next! Why give him the satisfaction? I've seen the Commissioner step on men like—like they were ants."

Jeff nodded darkly. "Then maybe I ought to let him step on me and get it over with." But instead, he took hold of Susan's wrist, pulling her towards him. "And yet, I

can't help but wonder what kind of life we might find together out on Mars . . .”





# Sixteen

*"They who would give up an essential liberty for temporary security, deserve neither liberty or security."*

— Benjamin Franklin

The following morning, Jeff Huxton stood before Ahmad Yehudit, recovered now from the savage beating Sovek had inflicted upon him the day before.

"Are you prepared to cooperate with us now, Jeff?" Ahmad intoned, hardly looking up at the man standing before him.

"I am."

"Very well," Ahmad replied. "As an incentive, I'm prepared to offer you a favorable new skoolplex assignment once we return to Earth, in any region you wish. Now, Officer Sovek will brief you about your—"

"I don't want to be returned to Earth," Jeff interrupted. "That is, if I'm to cooperate with you." He shot a glance at Sovek: "And Wopo."

"Oh?"

"I have nothing left on Earth to return to. Therefore, the price of my cooperation is a one-way ticket out of that madhouse."

"Please explain."

"I've heard that World Gov plans to establish a colony on Mars. I want to be a part of it."

A beat of time passed. Then, Ahmad said: "And should World Gov refuse?"

Glancing at Susan seated at the far end of the conference table, Jeff replied, "Then let's just say I'm ready for another round of your torture table, if you still want my cooperation."

Ahmad's face hardened. "You're being difficult, Jeff."

"No, I'm being what you are. I'm demanding something back for all the nothingness my life was spent on. Remember how you once told me that there was only so much happiness to go around? Well, I've never had my share, Ahmad." He slammed a

fist down on the table. "Now I'm here to collect."

Yehudit glanced at Colonel Lwanga, Dr. Mizuguchi, and all the others present. "And should World Gov agree to your demands?"

"Then, you'll make it official right now by changing my citizen status to Martian colonist."

Yehudit lifted his racially nondescript face to the Anglo-Saxon man standing before him. His kind still remained a damning reminder of the past, when individuals like him had ruled the greater part of the civilized world. Now they were almost extinct, dissolved forever into that great genetic vat of racially-intermixed, culturally-homogenized humanity. And yet, white men like Jeff Huxton still dared to assert themselves . . .

"Unfortunately Jeff, all prospective colonists must have a mate. And since you are no longer married you would not qualify, no matter what my recommendation to World Gov."

"But I will have a mate on Mars," Jeff replied. "In fact, she's sitting in this very room, right at this moment."

Sovek shot a glance towards Major Susan Kreitzler, the only woman present in the room.

Yehudit himself turned towards Major Kreitzler, as did Colonel Lwanga and the others.

"Is this true, Major?"

"It is, Commissioner." Susan answered, calmly holding Ahmad Yehudit's cold stare. "Jeff Huxton and I plan to marry."

Sovek jerked out of his seat, jealously flaring in his eyes. Since the expedition's departure from Earth, he had tried several times to break down Susan Kreitzler's resistance to his crude sexual advances, only to be rebuffed each time.

"As the Wopo officer personally assigned to guard this traitor," Sovek sneered, "I vote we return him to his cell and end this ridiculous charade once and for all."

Jeff looked over at Sovek, who returned his glance with icy hatred.

On the opposite side of the conference table Dr. Hiroyuki Mizuguchi, the mission's chief physician, leaned forward to speak. A man of quiet demeanor and modest stature, Mizuguchi possessed no other distinguishing characteristics except for his pronounced Japanese features—themselves almost as rare among the world's racially-intermixed humanity as Jeff's own Caucasian ones.

"Speaking strictly from a social context," Dr. Mizuguchi began, clasping his delicate

hands in front of him, "I must concur with Officer Sovek's rejection of the prisoner's demands. After all, such an unnatural union between two racially unblended individuals is morally reprehensible in today's society, and should be discouraged."

"You got that right, Doc," Sovek snorted, withdrawing his plasma gun and leveling it on Jeff. "Nobody needs vermin like him breeding more blue-eyed monsters." He shifted his eyes venomously towards Susan. "Or her."

"Please refrain from insults, Mr. Sovek," Ahmad cautioned.

Sovek spun around. "I'm telling you Huxton can't be trusted! This filthy louse betrayed World Gov once before trying to protect his traitorous son. What's to stop him now from cutting one of our throats—maybe even sabotaging this ship?"

"Nothing but the incompetence of Wopo," Major Kreitzler replied, turning a cool glance towards Sovek. "On the other hand, Commissioner Yehudit, a man given something to live for is a man you can trust."

Weighing Susan's words carefully, Ahmad gravely replied: "Yes . . . there is certainly truth in what you say, Major Kreitzler." Then, turning his attention back to Jeff, he said: "Very well. For the remainder of our journey you will be permitted free reign of the ship. You may venture wherever you wish, except for those areas specifically restricted to authorized personnel. In exchange for granting you permission to marry Susan Kreitzler and altering your citizen status to that of Martian colonist, you are hereby required to aid World Gov authorities in the identification and capture of one Karl Ramstrom, and/or any Nayra operatives or sympathizers this mission may encounter." Ahmad leaned forward, two meaty brown hands clasped in front of him. "Do I have your word on it, Jeff?"

Jeff nodded.

Disgusted, Sovek shoved his plasma gun back into its holster and made for the door. At the threshold, he whirled on Jeff. "You and that over-ranked slut won't get away with whatever you're planning, Huxton. I'll make certain of it."

An instant later he was gone.

With his newfound citizen status, Jeff was immediately awarded new living quarters on Deck 1, just down the corridor from Susan. Six hours later, her duty shift over, she came to him.

"So, how do you like being an undercover agent for Wopo?" she teased, tossing herself down onto an air sofa the moment she entered his quarters.

"I like being alive—if it means having you."

"Do you? After all?"

Jeff looked at her. "After all."

A moment later, he brought drinks and sat down beside her. "I want to confess something, Susan. After I learned what Yehudit and Sovek did to my son, I didn't want to go on living. In all truth, if you hadn't come along when you did and seen in me what I had long denied—I would have kept on defying Ahmad until he killed me."

"Seen what, Jeff?" She wanted to touch him, for him to touch her, in a way more intimate than she had ever dreamed with a man. And yet, she sensed he wasn't quite ready for that.

"My unhappiness. For years, it was a personal shame I bore. Looking back, my worst regret is that I raised two children in the shadow of that unhappiness. It's hard to admit, but I realize now they never had the father they should have had. Instead, they got a gloomy state bureaucrat too devoted to World Gov to ever have given them the love they needed." He took a sip of his drink, his eyes lost in the distance. "And now . . . they're gone."

"Jeff, don't torment yourself."

He grinned. "Lately, I'm pretty good at that. It's what I'm all about. Just a man living out a pointless life, devoid of any shred of love or joy. World Gov is my god, and I its loyal servant."

"But I love you, Jeff. I know that now, beyond all doubt."

Jeff took her hand. "And I want to love you, Susan. Deep down, one part of me already does. But the rest of me . . ."

"Yes?"

"The rest of me is still lost and wandering. Where, I don't know. Yet, there was a moment when I almost found that lost part of me, only to let it slip it away again . . ."

"When, Jeff?"

"That day I met a man named Karl Ramstrom. For the first time in my life, I felt free and alive. For the first time, I felt that happiness was possible to me. It was the strangest thing . . . but here was a man who truly believed in something, I remember thinking. A man who would die for what he believed in, rather than submit to something he found abhorrent. And here I was, just another obedient sheep in a world of sheep."

"Don't belittle yourself, Jeff."

"But it's true." He looked down at his hands. "And then you came along and I saw in you a beautiful woman and a chance to grab at a love I never had and didn't deserve." He looked back at her. "Still, I can't forget Karl Ramstrom . . . He devoted his life to a greater

love than I'll ever know, because he refused to live any other way but as a free man. Strange, even now . . . but I envy what he must have felt rising towards the stars as I lay there on the tarmac, huddled there beside my son. Ramstrom is what our Race was always meant to be, and I—" Jeff's voice suddenly broke as he leaned over, tears of shame rolling down his cheeks.

"Jeff . . . Jeff, please listen to me. Your best hope now is to give your life to us."

After a long moment Jeff looked up, tired and drawn. "Oh, I will. Of course I will. We all give ourselves to the expedient moment, don't we? It's much easier that way. It always has been . . ." He raised his eyes in distant regret. "But now that I know that World Gov committed an unspeakable crime against men like Karl Ramstrom and our people, there's something dead in everything that's left." Slowly, he got to his feet. "Maybe you'd better go now, Susan."

Susan rose and came to him. "Don't give in to this state of mind, Jeff! You and I can find happiness out on Mars, once this whole ugly business is behind us."

Gently, he pushed her away. "Don't worry Susan, I'll go with you. I'll be your husband and you'll be my wife. And together we'll grow old beside some alien desert in our last and final years. And I'll love you as much as I can still love anything anymore. Is that what you want to hear?"

Tears ran softly down her face. "Yes Jeff . . . I was so afraid you were going to change your mind."

"No, only—"

"Only what?"

"Only, we'll both always remember how we aided an evil man like Ahmad Yehudit and the genocidal government he serves. No matter how long we live, we'll always have that memory to haunt us . . ."

"What are you trying to say, Jeff?"

"I don't know . . ." He turned away, his jaw clenched in helpless anger.

Susan touched his arm. "It's not that you want to stop Commissioner Yehudit, is it?"

Jeff remained silent, forlorn, thinking.

"My God, Jeff! Against the power of World Gov what reason could either of us have in trying to stop Ahmad Yehudit and this mission?"

"No reason at all, except one. World Gov destroyed human diversity and called it 'good.' They did it by deliberately targeting people like us for extermination. Our people, Susan. Our flesh and blood. Yours and mine!"

“You shouldn’t talk this way, Jeff.”

“I know . . .”

Then he took her in his arms and spoke no more.





# Seventeen

*"No more tears now; I will think about revenge."*

*— Mary, Queen of Scots*

A fortnight and a half later, seven World Gov solarships swung into tight orbit around Mars, a phalanx of fusion-powered vessels bearing five thousand heavily armed Earth troops. Far below the orbiting solarships a rust-red world awaited, an ancient world torn by ceaseless dust storms and wracked by bone-chilling cold, a world long-dead and forbidden, empty of all life except for that which Man had tenuously given it.

Towards that forbidden world Jeff found himself now destined, uncertain, even yet, as to what lay ahead of him. Even so, he had little time to ponder his future, for in that moment Susan Kreitzler entered his cabin, trim and crisp in her blue and gray Global Air Force uniform.

"We've just established synchronous orbit over Valhalla Colony, Jeff. Our sensors show it's completely devoid of human life, as we expected. On the positive side, all life-support systems are still functioning."

"Valhalla . . . isn't that Avalon's sister colony?"

"That's correct. Long-abandoned, but it's not known why."

Rolling off his bunk, Jeff got to his feet and came over to Susan.

"What now?"

"Ahmad Yehudit has just ordered the first contingent of Unification troops down to the surface." She glanced at the orange world displayed on the view monitor. "I've also received orders to bring you down with us."

Jeff nodded. "And what about the Avalons? Surely they must have detected our approach to Mars."

"They haven't. Our ships are equipped with another of Zaslov's brilliant creations—a revolutionary new anti-sensor device that made our approach to Mars completely invisible." She slowly looked back at Jeff. "Ahmad Yehudit wants to make absolutely certain that Avalon Colony has no warning of our coming attack."

Jeff fell silent, and lowered his eyes.

For close to a century Valhalla Colony had sat, abandoned, nestled within a rocky canyon near Mars' north polar cap. Mounted along steep canyon walls, massive arrays of solar cells continued to power its life-support systems, long after the last human occupant had come and gone. Beneath its titanium dome hydroponic farms, tended and nurtured by automated systems, continued to produce and harvest crops, storing the yearly bounty deep inside underground storage freezers, preserved and untouched. In Valhalla proper, all lay silent, save for the whirring of machines and the susurrations of the air through the colony's vast network of air conduits. For even after a century, everything remained polished and gleaming, as unworn by the passage of time as when first built.

"Keep in mind that Avalon is almost thirty times larger than this," Susan pointed out to Jeff as they walked along through the abandoned colony, "and far more beautiful. By contrast, Valhalla was built strictly with durability in mind, which explains the all-metal, non-transparent dome." She gestured upward. "At the top of the dome you'll notice a cluster of high-intensity sunlamps, each powered by the colony's giant bank of solar cells. For almost a century they've provided a steady supply of heat and light, making it possible for the colony's hydroponic farms to continue functioning."

Jeff glanced about him, at the silvery latticework of metal structures, blinking circuitry, and automated machinery interlacing the entire colony, all whirring in synchronized harmony.

"Why do you suppose the Avalons abandoned this colony?" Jeff finally asked, looking again at the woman beside him.

"We're still not sure. Maybe they felt they couldn't effectively defend two colonies at once, and so settled on Avalon as the better choice. Besides, it's much larger and far more hospitable to long-term human occupation than this one."

They walked on, passing long-silent storefronts, workshops, offices, and living quarters that long-ago colonists had once occupied.

"This place kind of reminds me of an Old West town," Jeff remarked, "during the frontier era of the 19th century when settlements like this were scattered all across North America's lonely plains and deserts. Valhalla may be far more modern in appearance, but it still expresses that same sense of raw hope and courage that those earlier pioneers must have felt."

"Old West . . . ?"

Jeff stopped and looked curiously at Susan. "Why yes, the Old We—"

She stared back at him, her expression blank.

"Of course . . . you couldn't possibly know."

"Know what, Jeff?"

"About America's Old West . . ." Slowly, Jeff turned and looked off into the distance. "No one on Earth does . . . because it's all been erased from World Gov's history of that era. All the heroism, all the glory, all the mighty things our people once lived and died for . . ." Jeff moved his eyes back to Susan's. "I read about America's Old West many years ago, deep in the ruins of Kooroora Space Port. From what I learned, it was a period of history that saw America rise to become the richest, greatest, most powerful nation on Earth. Only, World Gov buried that truth, when they rewrote the histories of that period. Now, America is only remembered as an ignorant, backward, technologically primitive nation that remained unimportant for most of its history. That is, until massive African, Asian, and Latin migrations of the late twentieth century brought it greatness."

"It must be hard for you, Jeff," Susan said, "knowing what you do."

He reached out to her, his eyes softening. "You make it more bearable now."

She smiled, pleased by the touch of his hand. "Over there . . . is that a public area with a little place to sit . . . ?"

They walked towards it.

"Oh, how lovely," Susan said, coming to a halt beside the babbling waters of a fountain. "And a little park too, still green and growing after all these years . . ."

"A bit overgrown," Jeff observed, "but a nice touch after our long walk."

They stopped beneath a flowering tree, redolent with scented blossoms.

"I've never seen a tree like that before," Susan remarked, gazing upward into flowery branches.

"It's called a jacaranda tree," Jeff commented. "Native to South America, I believe, but widely grown in South Africa, my former home."

She turned an admiring gaze towards him. "You know so much about so many things."

Jeff smiled and took her hand as they strolled further into the little plaza, soft and intimate against the metallic luster of the colony. Then they paused again, embraced in blissful silence beneath the hovering jacaranda trees, an occasional lavender-hued blossom drifting softly down upon their shoulders.

"Such loveliness," Susan breathed, pausing to lift a fallen flower petal from Jeff's

shoulder. "Perhaps they're the only really lovely things left on this world."

"Except for you," Jeff murmured, looking down at her now as he took her into his arms.

For a long moment she remained still, her heart beating.

Then, parting her lips, she whispered, "Kiss me, Jeff, oh please kiss me . . ."

Slowly, Jeff lifted her face to his. "I've waited for so long, Susan. But until now, I've never felt I had the right."

"Kiss me . . ."

Then his lips touched hers, softly at first, as if in long-held acknowledgment of their enduring wait—before the full fury of a deeper hunger finally overcame them in that one burning instant.

"Over there," Susan suddenly gasped, pulling away from him in eager anticipation. "In that little area behind those orange flowers."

Quickly, they retreated beneath the falling jacaranda blossoms, beneath the glaring silver-colored dome, so alien to behold that it fused their beings into one common soul, as if in lonely defiance of this forbidden world and the stellar void beyond.

A moment later, behind a sheltering hedge of hibiscus, they tumbled down into cool green grass, their mouths hungrily searching back through all the years of love they had missed without each other.

For a long time after they lay in pleasure-sweetened silence, only dimly aware of the colony beyond. Finally, Susan pushed herself up and looked at him, her eyes both fierce and gentle all at once.

"I love you, Jeff."

Then, smiling blissfully, she lifted her violet-blue eyes to the titanium dome above. "And now, this confirms it."

"We'd better go," Jeff murmured, pulling her down for one last kiss.

"Yes, we'd better," she whispered back, breaking free of him. "I've a meeting with Colonel Lwanga and Commissioner Yehudit at 09:30." She touched his nose playfully. "But tonight . . ."

Rising, they quickly dressed, then slipped unobtrusively back onto the main thoroughfare bisecting the colony.

"Which way back?" Jeff finally asked, as they turned right onto another walkway, one of hundreds that interlaced the metal beehive of Valhalla.

“Up ahead, I think.”

Following Susan’s command, they continued further down the walkway, though it was more properly a service corridor, Jeff could see. Lined on both sides with automated repair stations, there was hardly more than two meters of space between one side and the other. A little further on they veered left, down another narrow canyon of metal-walled repair stations, this one even longer.

“Jeff—”

Jeff turned a casual glance towards the woman who would soon be his wife, his eyes silently responding to her strangely worried utterance.

“—there’s someone behind us.”

Jeff flicked an eye over his shoulder. It was true. A shadowy figure, unbeknownst until now, had entered the service corridor behind them.

“Just another member of the expedition out for a stroll, I would imagine,” Jeff remarked, trying to keep his own concern in check.

“Is he?” Susan echoed, her voice now rising to a keen edge.

“What else could he be doing?”

“I don’t know. But whatever he’s up to, he’s closing on us—fast.”

Jeff saw that she was right, even as he took her by the elbow and increased their pace. The stranger behind them, whoever he was, suddenly accelerated his pursuit.

“Jeff—!”

Jeff jerked around in the direction of Susan’s scream. Three new individuals had suddenly appeared—this time in front of them. Hearing Susan’s outburst, they momentarily halted, frozen by an instant of indecision. Taking advantage of their hesitation, Susan grabbed Jeff by the arm and pulled him sideways into one of the automated repair shops.

“I left my service weapon in my quarters,” she cried, “but there must be something in here we can use to defend ourselves!” Tearing through the small, metal-walled workshop, they searched for any sort of weapon. Nearby, a lone servo-mech toiled away on a disassembled machine, oblivious to their presence.

“Over there!” Susan exclaimed, seizing a small laser-welding tool lying on a counter. Acting with lightning speed, her movements coordinated by years of military training, she jammed the laser-welding tool into the servo-mech’s clawed hand even as she flipped opened its chest panel, exposing an array of control tabs. Flicking the fingertips of one hand deftly over them, Susan furiously keyed in a special computer code, known only to

high-ranking military personnel.

“That should do it!”

“Nice trick—but how?” Jeff asked, even as the servo-mech stopped what it was doing and turned menacingly towards the door.

“I’ll tell you some other time,” Susan shot back, pulling Jeff further from the door even as the laser-armed servo-mech—now turned killer robot—suddenly confronted their pursuers. An instant later Jeff heard a man shriek, simultaneous with his neck being snapped. A second man made what sounded like a wet, crunching thud against a metal wall just before he too fell silent. Then, several laser bursts sliced the air, followed by a frantic shout: “Use a grenade!”

Jeff had no time to react before he and Susan were engulfed by a turquoise flash of light just beyond the doorway. The force of the explosion vaporized the servo-mech even as it blew them both back against the far wall, stunning them into momentary unconsciousness.

Seconds later Jeff regained his senses, followed by Susan. Groggy and disoriented, they looked up to see a familiar figure, standing dark and ominous against the scorched outline of the doorway, the barrel of a plasma gun aimed directly at them.

Enrique Sovek.

A cold Martian wind whined forlornly over frost-covered sand dunes as a lone, caterpillar-tracked vehicle lumbered across them, headed eastward.

“So, how do you like your first visit to sunny Mars?” Sovek asked, turning a knife-edged glance in Jeff’s direction, who sat bound and gagged in the row of seats directly behind the Wopo agent. Susan Kreitzler, also bound and gagged, sat to Jeff’s immediate right, her violet-blue eyes fixed hatefully on their captor.

“You’ll find it’s a really nice place, Huxton—that is, a really nice place to die.” Sovek flicked a callous glance towards Susan. “Along with your ex-bride-to-be, of course.”

Jeff made a sudden effort to break free of his bonds, his eyes full of murder. Sovek, laughing, backhanded him with a vicious swipe of his hand. “That’s for your trouble, freak.” Still chuckling, he turned around again, and said no more.

They rode for a great distance, their eight-wheeled, caterpillar-tracked vehicle slithering across a frost-bitten, desolate wasteland unrelieved by any glint of civilization. Along with Sovek, Jeff and Susan, one other individual occupied the cramped sand rover. It was Dr. Hiroyuki Mizuguchi, the mission’s chief physician. His demeanor, as cold as the Martian landscape beyond, sent a chill down Jeff’s spine.

“Too bad you have to die too, Susan,” Sovek remarked affably, after an hour-long silence. “But then, stuck-up whores like you don’t deserve to live.”

Susan, had her gag been removed, would have spit in his face. And Sovek, chuckling back at her, knew it.

“Anyway, just in case you two lovebirds have been wondering, this little picnic to hell was entirely my idea. You see, I don’t like full-breeds like you. Never have. You just don’t fit in. So . . . I figured I’d do World Gov a little favor and put you two freaks out of your misery.”

The sand rover veered left, heading out across a stretch of rocky, frost-covered ground. “By the way, the Doc here wants you just as dead as I do. Seems white people like you once dropped a nuclear bomb on his people, long time ago. Don’t know if that’s true or not, but it really doesn’t matter. You’re white, and that’s good enough reason for me to kill you.”

Sovek grinned again, his cold gray eyes fixed on theirs. “I especially despise you, Huxton. You’re nothing but a filthy Nayra traitor. No, you’re worse than that. You’re a dirty coward who betrayed your own kind just because you lacked the guts to go along with their plan. When push came to shove, all you cared about was saving your own worthless skin, along with that nut-case son of yours.”

Jeff bucked against his restraints at the first mention of his son, knowing instinctively that Sovek must have had a major hand in torturing and killing him. His realization must have shown on his face, for the Wopo agent suddenly laughed, loud and hard.

“That’s right, Mr. Skoolplex Administrator. I killed your son—nice and slow while a dozen others looked on—including Commissioner Yehudit himself.”

Jeff started to hyperventilate, the inside of his skull ripped by a tornado of red fury.

“He begged in the end, Huxton . . . actually slobbered for mercy.” Sovek grinned at Jeff’s near-mindless rage, relishing it. “That’s when I cut his balls off—with this.” At that, Sovek whipped out a long-bladed knife and danced it tauntingly in front of Jeff’s eyes. “Oh yeah . . . I made sure it took a sweet, long time for your son to die, once this little beauty went to work on him . . .”

A furious, muffled cry escaped Jeff’s gagged mouth, hideous in its sorrow. Sovek laughed again, then laughed even harder after seeing Susan’s anguished look of compassion towards the man beside her.

“Hey, cheer up, Huxton. You and that bitch whore of yours are headed for a honeymoon in hell, courtesy of Wopo.” Sovek smirked. “Besides, you got in one good

fuck with her, didn't you? I oughta know, since I watched you both go at it in that little park back at Valhalla. What a show you two put on. Just like two gooey-eyed teenagers out on First Time." Sovek chuckled again. "Only—for you—it turned out to be your Last Time. Ha ha. Pretty good joke, that one."

Jeff closed his eyes, dying inside.

Susan tried to reach out to him, to say she loved him and that none of this mattered because of that. But there was no way to do so, and so she too lowered her eyes.

Wind-blown dust swirled about the sand rover as it slowed near an outcropping of tumbled boulders. This is it, Jeff thought. For Susan's sake, if not your own, die like a man.

In support of that, he bravely raised his head and looked straight at his soon-to-be executioner. That he would die here, on this windswept world millions of kilometers from home, was a fate he never could have dreamt of. Few men ever know the hour of their death, he realized, or have the time to prepare for it. Yet, Fate had given him that dubious privilege, and so he must now make the most of it. Still, he would gladly die two such deaths at the hands of Enrique Sovek, if by so doing Susan's life could be spared . . .

A moment later, with a damning sense of finality, Sovek brought the sand rover to an abrupt halt. As he disengaged his seat belt, he spoke something unintelligible to Dr. Mizuguchi, then twisted around in his seat. "Okay, Huxton. This is the end of the line for you and the whore. Don't make it any harder on yourself by trying something stupid." He reached back and tore off their gags. "Hey, what's the fun of watching you two die unless I can hear you scream, right?" Turning back to Mizuguchi, Sovek said: "Get their helmets on." Then, grinning back at Jeff and Susan, he added: "Wouldn't want you two to suffocate, now would we?"

Seconds later, both men stepped outside the sand rover with their two captives. Handing Mizuguchi his plasma gun, Sovek brought out his knife again, a thin stain of a smile spreading across his lips.

"All it takes is one little pinprick in your pressure suit to make for a slow and painful death, Huxton. Just a pinprick." He moved his knife first towards Susan, then back towards Jeff. "A hard choice, picking who dies first. Maybe the whore should. That way, you can watch her die too, Huxton. Oughta be fun either way, don't you think?"

Finally, Sovek's knife came to rest in front of Major Kreitzler.

"Yeah . . ." Sovek breathed. "What better way to get the show on the road than by killing this fucking bitch first."



"You'll never get away with murdering us," Susan suddenly blurted, trying to buy them time until she could think of something—anything—that might save them.

"Funny, but it don't look that way to me, bitch. Besides, you and Huxton will never be found. After you're dead, the Doc and I are gonna shovel some sand over your stinking corpses and that'll be that."

"Why kill us, Enrique? Why risk your hard-earned career out of petty jealousy?"

Sovek's face, behind his transparent helmet, darkened with contempt. "Petty jealousy? Ha. That's rich. You had a chance to have a real man—a man someone in your skintone class didn't even deserve. And yet you rejected me for this—this pale-skinned skoolplex maggot. For that alone you don't deserve to live. No bitch traitorous to the racial ideals of World Gov does."

"Then kill us now with your plasma gun and be done with it," Susan said.

Jeff knew she meant it, knowing now there could be no possible escape for either of them.

Sovek grinned. "And miss watching you suffer? Not a chance."

The knife suddenly moved upward, coming within centimeters of Susan's pressure suit. Pausing for an instant, all it took now was just a slight forward thrust, and Susan's pressure suit would puncture, exposing her to agonizing decompression.

At that very same instant, Sovek's eyes suddenly widened as the sharp muzzle of a plasma gun jabbed into his back.

"Drop the knife very carefully," Dr. Mizuguchi said.

"What's going on—?"

"Drop it," the Japanese doctor repeated. "Now."

Slowly, the knife tipped forward out of Sovek's hand and fell into the windblown sand at his feet. The shock on the Wopo agent's face was devastating.

Dr. Mizuguchi glanced at Jeff. "Pick up his weapon. Quickly."

Jeff hesitated only for a second. Then, a moment later, with Sovek's knife now safely in hand, he turned to Mizuguchi: "You—why? None of this makes any sense."

Dr. Mizuguchi slowly backed away from Sovek. "It will. You see, I'm the Nayra sympathizer Mr. Sovek and his fellow Wopo agents have been searching for on this mission. The one they hoped your presence would lure into the open."

Sovek lurched towards the Oriental-featured man. "I'll kill you—!"

"No, Mr. Sovek, I think not. However, another step on your part and I will—" he

smiled enigmatically, “—burn you down. Is that the correct phrase?”

Sovek’s face became almost insane with hatred, beyond anything Jeff thought possible in a human being.

“Mark my words, Dr. Mizuguchi. You’ll die for this. In ways you can’t even begin to imagine.”

“Not at your hands, however. Of that, I am most certain.” He turned towards Susan and Jeff again. “I’ll explain everything back in the sand rover. Hurry please—one cannot survive in this environment without air, and ours is soon to run out.”

As the three of them climbed back into the heated cocoon of the sand rover, Sovek began to froth with uncontrollable rage the instant he realized Mizuguchi was going to leave him behind.

“To your seats then,” Mizuguchi urged. “We must put this ugly necessity behind us as quickly as possible.” Engaging the sand rover’s electric-powered drive with a softly spoken word, the eight wheeled vehicle suddenly kicked forward, spewing a cloud of sand into Sovek’s enraged face.

“What about me?” the Wopo agent screamed, running after the fast retreating sand rover. “What about me?”

What about you?, Jeff thought, looking over his shoulder at the frantically chasing Wopo agent, until he finally stumbled and vanished, somewhere in the crimson-hazed distance behind.



# Eighteen

*“Adversity is the first path to truth.”*

*— Lord Byron*

“You—a Nayra sympathizer?” Jeff Huxton exclaimed as the sand rover rolled over the next sand dune on its way back to Valhalla Colony.

Dr. Mizuguchi glanced over at him. “Yes, for quite some time now.”

“I don’t understand it either,” Susan said, just as perplexed as Jeff. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It does if you think about it,” Dr. Mizuguchi explained. “You see, I may not be a Caucasian, but I understand Nayra’s struggle to regain their racial integrity. We few who are of Japanese ancestry also wish to regain ours.”

Jeff thought about that for a moment, then said, “But what can you or Nayra possibly hope to accomplish? World Gov maintains an iron grip on society.”

“For now.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that World Gov cannot hope to maintain its authority for very much longer. Not if sufficient pressure can be applied against it.”

“What kind of pressure?” Jeff asked.

“The pressure of a nuclear detonation in the heart of Beijing, for example.”

Susan leaned forward in her seat. “How? From whom?”

“I’m afraid I can say no more than that, other than we who are of Japanese ancestry have united with Nayra operatives on Earth with but one goal in mind—toppling World Gov and the corrupt system it rules.”

“But without World Gov the whole infrastructure of society would—”

“Fall apart,” Dr. Mizuguchi quietly finished, looking over at Jeff.

They rode the rest of the way back in silence.

An hour later, as they neared the perimeter of Valhalla Colony, Jeff asked: "Has Avalon Colony been alerted yet to Ahmad Yehudit's invasion plan?"

For the first time, Mizuguchi looked grim. "Unfortunately, Mr. Huxton, our arrival here has been effectively concealed by Dr. Zaslov's sensor-shield, which completely masks our presence on this planet. It also prevents any electronic communication with Avalon Colony. I know that to be the case, since I have tried."

"What now?" Susan asked.

"It would seem that sabotage is my next option," Mizuguchi replied. "Whatever it takes, Commissioner Yehudit and his mission must be stopped."

Reminded once again of Karl Ramstrom's soaring flight to freedom that long-ago day in Africa, Jeff suddenly thought of Adam's unborn child, who had also been aboard that daring flight. Even now, he must be with his mother, held safe in her arms, somewhere beyond that darkening horizon . . .

"I want to help you, Doctor."

Mizuguchi looked over at Jeff, studying him for a moment. How different he was, the Japanese man thought, with his strange, aqua-colored eyes and his tawny-hued hair. Oh, how different he was! No race of men had ever looked like this blue-eyed being before him. Nothing like him or his kind had ever arisen upon the dusty veldts of Africa, the burning plains of Asia, or deep within the sweltering jungles of South America. For all those places had been the homes of dark-eyed, dark-haired peoples like himself, but never of men like these. Yet, by some twisted logic Mizuguchi could not fathom, humans like Jeff Huxton had been deliberately destroyed . . . all in the name of some dubious global religion called "cultural diversity." But where was this vaunted "diversity" that World Gov so often spoke of, if men like Jeff Huxton had been purposefully removed from it?

Where?

Dr. Mizuguchi had no answer. He feared finding one, in fact, for he knew such an answer would be far uglier than anything he ever hoped to contemplate. It was enough that he knew it was wrong, that which had been done to men like Jeff Huxton. It was enough that he saw more kinship between himself and this strange being seated beside him than all the racially-mongrelized humanity in the world, all mixed up into part-this, part-that, and part-something-else that slithered and crawled through all the teeming cities of Earth. More terrifying still, mankind was devolving with each passing generation, becoming less and less intelligent as the genetic pool was further and further muddled by worldwide miscegenation.

"I would be honored to have your assistance, Mr. Huxton," Dr. Mizuguchi finally said, reaching out and clasping Jeff's hand.

"Don't leave me out," Susan Kreitzler interjected, placing her hand atop the clasped hands of the other two. "Because I know just what to do in order to sabotage Commissioner Yehudit's entire invasion plan . . ."

Night fell over the Martian desert as Jeff Huxton lay in his quarters inside Valhalla Colony. Nearby, the sound of more troops arriving from World Gov's orbiting fleet of solarships could be heard, as one by one they marched out of just-landed shuttles into the main compound of the colony.

Five thousand of them, Jeff thought. Five thousand heavily armed Unification troops against an unwary and unsuspecting Avalon Colony. Once gathered, Ahmad's strike force would fly to within fifty kilometers of Avalon, where a long-abandoned space port awaited them. From there, according to what Susan had learned, Ahmad's troops would enter subterranean transport tubes that would take them directly into Avalon. By the time the Avalons realized what was happening, their defenses would be breached . . .

Unless . . .

Unless he, Susan, and Dr. Mizuguchi could somehow stop them.

At that moment, the door to his quarters chimed, causing Jeff to jump to his feet.

Moving to the door, he jabbed it open.

It was Susan.

"Come on," was all she said.

Jeff nodded, and a moment later they were off.

They darted quickly through the colony, taking unguarded service corridors until they reached the central core of the titanium dome. Once there, they met up with Dr. Mizuguchi, then made their way towards a small elevator, which bore them downward until they reached a circular control room, surrounded on all sides with multi-colored instrument panels and glowing monitors.

"This is how we stop Ahmad Yehudit," Susan said.

"Along with his entire strike force," Dr. Mizuguchi somberly added.

"By what means?" Jeff asked.

"By this," Susan said, indicating a control panel to her left. "It controls the atmospheric system of Valhalla. If I override the safety controls, I can cause a sudden atmospheric decompression throughout the entire colony." She looked up at Jeff. "Within a few seconds, Ahmad Yehudit's entire strike force will be deprived of air—and

suffocated.”

Jeff glanced down at the control panel, at the three-dimensional, multi-colored read-outs. For almost a century they had glowed, deep down in this vault, keeping Valhalla warm and alive. Now, they would be used to kill that which they had been built to protect.

“Let’s do it,” Jeff said with finality, looking up again.

As Susan sat down in front of the control panel and began to key in a stream of data, Mizuguchi opened a nearby storage locker and took out three pressure suits. Handing one to Jeff, he said, “Put this on, Mr. Huxton.”

As Jeff slipped into the pressure suit and helmet, he watched Susan finish up her deadly game plan. Then, seconds later, she too was suited up, along with Mizuguchi.

The moment had arrived.

“Ready?” Susan asked, looking grimly at the other two.

Two pressurized helmets nodded back at her.

Susan returned the nod, then lowered a gloved finger towards a blinking tab of yellowish-green light. But the moment her finger made contact, alarm klaxons erupted throughout the control room.

Susan whipped her eyes towards Jeff. “Oh my god! It means the colony’s safety system is under outside control.” She whirled towards the doorway. “They know!”

Mizuguchi drew his plasma gun.

“It is over for us. A good gamble, but we lost.”

Jeff grabbed Susan’s arm and made a break for the door.

In that same instant, Mizuguchi opened fire, tearing the room apart in a series of green flashes as half a dozen Wopo officers emerged from concealment. Two went down before a bolt of plasma caught the doctor in his mid-section, dropping his charred corpse to the floor.

Jeff, still gripping Susan’s hand, felt a sudden surge of heat upon his own back. Hold tight, he thought, even as he felt her slipping away, forever away, like a dream he never wanted to wake from, beyond all reach and all hope, slipping away with all the happiness he had ever longed for, and now would never know again . . .

A cold wind blew over red Martian sand as Ahmad Yehudit reached the top of a high dune and gazed out at the fabled colony of Avalon. Rising in jeweled splendor

beside the dried bed of an ancient sea, its cluster of silver and gold pinnacles towered beneath a sun-sparkled pressure dome. "A more beautiful thing I have not seen . . ." the Commissioner of Multiculturalism whispered. "All the words of Allah cannot describe it."

Following up behind him came Jeff Huxton, surrounded by six armed Wopo officers. Even as the skoolplex administrator watched, the towers in the distance flared with green plasma fire as five thousand Unification troopers continued to battle their way through the heart of the colony. For three hours the fighting had raged, as section after section of the massive colony was attacked, captured, and occupied by World Gov forces.

Jeff Huxton's jaw tightened in helpless anger. "God damn you, Ahmad."

At the sound of Jeff's voice coming over his helmet speaker, Ahmad slowly turned around. "God will never damn me, Jeff. Nor, for that matter, all the gods of Chrislamhinbuddhism. For the end of Avalon will finally bring humanity peace and harmony."

"You mean the peace and harmony of racial genocide, you murderous bastard."

Ahmad laughed pleasantly. "Jeff . . . Jeff . . . where is your loyalty? Where is your faith in the wisdom of World Gov?"

Jeff lurched at Yehudit, only to feel the iron grip of two Wopo officers hold him back.

"For Buddha's sake, there are innocent children in that colony!"

Ahmad shook his massive brown head. "How insensitive of you, Jeff. Every year, hundreds of thousands of children are euthanized back on Earth, many times the number who will die here today. Did you ever cry for them? Did you ever—even once?" Ahmad chuckled again. "Of course not, Jeff. After all, isn't your own daughter Puja a member of the Euth Corps? Is she not doing her patriotic duty, even now, exterminating those the world is better off without?" Ahmad came forward, huge and menacing in his pressure suit and helmet. "Of course she is . . . And now, here you are, a citizen of World Gov called upon to do his duty."

Jeff swallowed hard. "Why kill them?"

Ahmad glanced back towards the glittering towers of Avalon. "A man like Karl Ramstrom will never cease his war against the Unification if we allow him to live." He looked back at Jeff. "Not that it will matter, a year or two from now."

Jeff's eyes suddenly came alert. "What do you mean?"

Ahmad lowered his leathery eyelids for a moment, as if staring into a dark abyss. "I



suppose it will do no harm to tell you now.”

“Tell me what?”

Ahmad raised his eyes again. “World Gov was a noble dream, Jeff. You and I both know that. Yet, sometimes, dreams fail. Sometimes . . . all the good intentions in the world will not spare the world from tragedy.”

“What kind of tragedy are you talking about?”

Ahmad hesitated, then gravely answered: “Global starvation . . . beyond anything mankind has ever faced. Billions will die.”

Jeff stared blankly into the distance, trying to comprehend it all. Then, barely above a whisper, he said: “So that’s it . . . World Gov’s top leadership plans to escape the coming fall by using Zaslov’s stardrive to reach another world. And that also explains why you came out here to Mars—to capture a datacube decoder in order to make it possible.”

Ahmad nodded solemnly. “How pleasing it is that lengthy explanations are never necessary with you, Jeff. You are quite correct. You see, within two years, perhaps less, Earth will collapse into barbarism. Billions will perish, her institutions will topple, and humanity as we know it will cease to exist. It may be centuries before civilization recovers—if ever.”

Jeff turned his eyes back to Ahmad, then outward again towards the embattled towers of Avalon. “So this is how it finally ends. The great and noble experiment in human brotherhood and racial equality. Earth reduced to barbarism and the last of my people exterminated . . .” A bitter chuckle escaped from Jeff. “And to think my ancestors sold out our heritage, our culture, and our race . . . to end like this.”

Ahmad’s face darkened with sudden malice. “What do you mean your heritage, your culture, and your race?” Ahmad loomed over him. “Where is the evidence that your kind ever had any heritage, culture, or race, Jeff?”

When Jeff failed to respond, Ahmad laughed mockingly at him. “I’ll tell you, then. It’s dust on the wind. It’s forgotten. No, it’s more than that. It’s like it never existed. World Gov rewrote history and when they did they rewrote the achievements of the white race right out of existence. Do you understand what that means, Jeff? Do you? A thing that is forgotten may one day be remembered. But a thing that is erased—is gone forever. You and your kind have been erased.”

Pretending to look away, Jeff suddenly pushed hard against Ahmad, shoving the huge man aside. Dashing for the edge of the dune, he leapt head over heels down the slope, fleeing towards the bottom. Picking up speed as he ran, he pushed his middle-aged body beyond the limits of its capacity, like an engine running hot and without oil.

Yet fear and desperation drove him furiously on.

Another hundred meters across the Martian wasteland and he risked a backward glance, catching sight of six Wopo officers in hot pursuit. Even so, five of them were already falling behind, leaving but the swiftest one way out in front and fast gaining on him.

Jeff ran on.

Ahead, three sand rovers sat glinting in the Martian sun. An hour earlier, they had transported Ahmad Yehudit, six Wopo officers, and himself out from World Gov's base camp in order to observe the early morning assault against Avalon. Now, one of them might be his means of escape—if only he could reach it in time.

Jeff pounded onward, his lungs gasping with fire.

As he closed on the nearest sand rover, something grabbed him from behind, knocking him down in a tangled heap to the red Martian sand. Rolling over onto his back, Jeff collided helmets with a pockmarked Afro-Hispanic face, its twisted mouth snarling with hate.

Knowing this to be his final grab at freedom, Jeff seized hold of a jagged rock and swung it forward with all his might, smashing it straight into the Wopo officer's pressure helmet and cracking it open. An explosive hiss of escaping air preceded the man's enraged scream as he watched his life gush out into the pitiless Martian desert.

Shoving the convulsing body aside, Jeff snatched up the dying officer's plasma gun and opened fire on his remaining pursuers. Burning three of them down in quick succession, he then turned and made for the nearest sand rover. Jumping through the hatch, he hopped into the control seat and threw the electric-powered machine into high gear, roaring off across the rippling sand dunes. Glancing back for an instant, he spotted his two remaining pursuers now flanking a third man—a man heavy of stature and dark of countenance, like a silent bull elephant standing guard at the forefront of a nineteen-billion-strong herd.

A herd that Jeff Huxton had—at long last—finally broken free of.

He drove at top speed towards the fabled towers of Avalon. As he neared the Martian colony, Jeff grew steadily overwhelmed by everything he saw. Ahmad had been right. Avalon was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Rising beneath a transparent shell half a kilometer in diameter, its gold and silver towers spoke of a titanic glory that had once graced mankind.

Who had built such splendor?

Whither had they gone?

And then, Jeff passed a concrete pylon rising from the desert—and knew. Inscribed upon its surface he read the words:

*Avalon Colony  
Founded August 2073  
United States of America*

Jeff lowered his eyes, as if he stood in silent homage beside the edge of a grave. Here was proof against all the lies of World Gov, he realized. Here, at last, stood undeniable evidence that Africa was not the progenitor of human progress, nor Asia. Here, upon these ancient red sands, stood the shining glory of his people. A glory that had been ruthlessly erased from the minds of humanity.

For it was his people—his people!—and his alone, who had given mankind the wings to reach the skies above and the planets beyond. Not Africa! Not Asia! Not all the filthy revisionist liars who controlled the highest echelons of World Gov! For it was Euro-ethnic people, and no other, who had shed their shining grace upon all the far-flung corners of the Earth, banishing human ignorance forever. His people, and no other, who had given to all the darkened hordes of the world their bounteous wealth of knowledge, their unquenchable optimism in the future of Man, and finally, their exalted human spirit.

And yet—for all of that—they had been deliberately destroyed!

In that one terrible moment of revelation, a thin mist of unbearable sorrow descended over Jeff's eyes. What glory his race had lost. What Promethean heights they had scaled, only to be toppled from. And now . . . to what cave-like depths they had fallen, here upon the cold borderlands of space.

Ahead, the towers of Avalon beckoned.

Beckoned to every gene and fiber in his body, like some ancient call to one's earliest beginnings. He was coming home at last, a wayward son of his Race now returning to fight a last battle against extinction. There would be others like him, sturdy men of Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic and Scandinavian heritage, men with a thousand years of unmatched courage coursing through their veins. And beside them would stand other men; men whose ancestors had risen along the halcyon shores of the Mediterranean, descendants of those who had pondered the universe and forged the foundation of all the world's knowledge. They too, side by side with their northern brothers, would wage their last battle against the extinction of their common Race.

And against them would stand the mongrelized hordes of a multiculturalized humanity, those nineteen billion who had stolen the glories of a civilization they themselves could neither equal nor achieve. For such was the alpha and the omega of his people, Jeff realized, here upon these alien red sands. And if this was so, then what greater honor could he ever know than to die here at their side?

Strengthened by this knowledge, Jeff pushed onward across the windswept Martian sands. Five minutes later, the towering shadow of Avalon swept over him, as if the mighty presence of a fearsome giant had suddenly stepped into view. As he drove towards a bank of airlocks, Jeff looked skyward at the crystalline towers rising beyond the dome's plastron membrane. Here and there nova grenades and plasma fire erupted in bright green flashes as Jeff's people valiantly fought back against the invaders. The sight tore at his heart, and for an instant a volcanic rage engulfed him. For this was the sum total of the Unification, he realized. This murderous evil that had shrouded the world for almost a century—and now unleashed against this final refuge of his Race.

Yet, he fought down his fury, knowing he would need all his senses about him were he to survive his entry into the battle-inflamed colony. Resolutely, he shoved his plasma gun, along with half a dozen extra power-paks, into his pockets, then headed straight for the nearest airlock. Reaching it a moment later, he drove the sand rover through the automatic door, then waited as the chamber within re-pressurized.

Seconds later, after activating a sequence of airlock controls, a second door at the far end of the chamber slid aside, exposing a long, metal-walled tunnel. Jeff drove down the length of it, finally stopping at the far end where another large door, one capable of allowing entry of large vehicles into the colony proper, stood. However, after a moment of consideration, Jeff elected not to drive the sand rover beyond it, fearing the vehicle might draw plasma fire from either Unification troops or colonists, once it crossed to the far side.

Instead, he nimbly exited the sand rover and proceeded towards a second, much smaller door, one situated off to one side of the tunnel. Presumably, it allowed individuals on foot, perhaps service technicians, to pass back and forth between the interior of the colony and the airlock tunnel. Whatever the case, Jeff quickly walked up to it and pressed a glowing rectangle of greenish light, sliding the door open and exposing a narrow corridor beyond. Bringing his weapon to bear, he darted inside, sweeping the passage from side to side. Finding it empty, he moved swiftly forward, coming at last to another doorway.

Approaching it with great caution, Jeff peered beyond its transparent surface into the heart of Avalon itself. What he saw nearly took his breath away. In the near distance, a lush ring of tropical forest encircled the center of the colony, out of which clusters of

gleaming, iridescent towers arose. It was an awesome melding of technological splendor with the primitive grandeur of nature, an Eden more astonishing to behold than any earthly god had ever dreamt.

And yet, Avalon Colony was already dying—going up in flames even as he watched. Once more, a deep tide of sorrow flooded Jeff's soul, knowing he was watching the final moments of his great race as they bravely fought amongst the lofty towers and soaring pinnacles their minds and spirits alone had built.

Driven onward, Jeff jabbed the control button at the side of the door and slid it open, dashing headlong into the battle-torn midst of the Martian colony. He had no plan of action other than to give his life, if necessary, in defense of his people. Susan, he sadly remembered, already had; and for an instant, his heart tightened in almost unbearable pain. Then, with tears streaming down his eyes, he saw again Karl Ramstrom's mighty pillar of flame rising against a hot African sky, and found the courage to go on . . .

Running towards the forest in the distance, Jeff passed hundreds of dead colonists and Unification troops along the way. Fierce fighting had already swept through this part of the colony, he could see, and was now concentrated near the center of Avalon. It was towards that center of fighting that he ran, like a man running from darkness towards sunlight and everlasting freedom.

As he neared the colony's outer ring of forest, Jeff's eyes took in all the wondrous beauty that surrounded him. Tree-shaded lakes, fed by Martian polar cap waters, lay nestled among thick groves of coconut palms. Further away, in the shadowy heights of towering banyan trees, tropical birds chattered incessantly, high above the colorful playgrounds now void of their children . . .

Minutes later, crouched beside the trunk of a liana-draped tree, Jeff scanned the forest gloom ahead for any sign of movement. But he saw nothing, save for the fluttering motion of parrots darting here and there amid the lush growth. Moving forward again, he came upon a concrete pathway and followed it towards the center of Avalon, passing the bodies of dead colonists along the way. Many had apparently fled this way during the opening attack by Unification troops, grim evidence of Ahmad Yehudit's iron will to exterminate the white race right down to the last gene.

Further along, Jeff paused beside several more bodies, those of a young family. Charred by plasma bursts, they lay huddled together in death, the arms of both mother and father wrapped protectively around the child that even their love could not save. Kneeling beside them, Jeff felt hot tears well in his eyes, knowing this same fate must have befallen his people nearly a century ago, as the forces of multiculturalism engulfed the world.

A moment later, as he got up to move on, a sudden cry in the woods just off the pathway froze Jeff in his tracks. Yanking around his plasma gun, he probed the thick green vegetation with a piercing blue glance.

Nothing.

Then, a second cry, weaker than the first, drew his attention towards a clump of foliage some twenty meters away. Cautiously, Jeff moved towards it, trodding carefully lest the snapping of a twig bring a plasma burst his way. A third cry, now more a whimper than anything else, told him he was not stalking an enemy—but a victim. Advancing several steps further, he came upon the body of a young girl, perhaps twelve, lying crumpled amid the foliage. Stripped naked from the waist down, it was obvious she had been raped.

For a moment Jeff stood immobilized, his jaw clenched in a murderous rage. There was no question in his mind that Unification troops had done this on their sweep through the area. That the girl hadn't also been murdered, after being savagely brutalized, must have been a hasty oversight by the animals responsible.

Finally shaking the revulsion from his mind, Jeff knelt beside the girl. A quick examination revealed no life-threatening injury, and so he gathered her scattered clothing and redressed her.

"Are you alright?" he gently asked, once the girl was clothed and standing again.

After a hesitant moment, the frightened child nodded.

Jeff smiled. "My name's Jeff. Can you tell me yours?"

The girl slowly raised her eyes. "Mara."

"Hello, Mara."

Taking a closer look at the girl, Jeff noted her long blonde hair and hazel eyes, thinking how natural they seemed on her. And yet, back on Earth, she would have been marked as a racial freak.

"Are my parents . . . dead?" the girl asked, looking fearfully towards the pathway.

Following her glance, Jeff recalled the blonde man he'd found lying next to the woman and young boy. Now that he thought about it, Mara bore a marked resemblance to him.

"I'm afraid so, Mara . . ."

"And my little brother too?" she asked, fighting bravely not to tremble.

Jeff lowered his eyes, thinking again of the innocent little boy lying huddled between his parents—the same parents he now realized must have also been Mara's.

“Yes . . .”

The girl looked away, crying soft tears.

After a long interval had passed, Jeff slowly pulled her around again. “I’m trying to reach the center of Avalon. I don’t know if I’ll make it. But if you want, you’re welcome to come with me.”

The girl looked uncertainly at him. “You’re not from here, are you?”

Jeff nodded. “No. I come from Earth.”

“But you’re not a mult—mults don’t look like you.”

“No.”

Mara looked off towards the center of Avalon, her eyes growing fearful again. “The mults are killing everyone, aren’t they?”

Jeff dropped his eyes for a moment, then said, in a quieter tone of voice, “Listen to me, Mara. Very carefully. I’ve got to find a man named Karl Ramstrom. Have you ever heard of him?”

“Every kid has. He’s the man who fights against the mults.”

“That’s right,” Jeff said eagerly, “the man who fights against the mults.” He drew her towards him. “I have something very important to give him. Something of great value. For him, for you, for all our people. Have you any idea where I might find him?”

She thought a moment, then said: “There’s a building, I think. Near the Monument of Nayra. He might be there . . .”

Jeff smiled encouragingly at her.

“Can you take me there?”

“I think so . . .”

“That’s a good scout.”

And for the first time since being found, little Mara smiled.





# Nineteen

*“What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.”*

*— Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Together, Jeff and little Mara moved on down the concrete pathway, winding their way through lush gardens of tropical plantings. Towering palms of a hundred different species thrust their heads towards the great curved dome of Avalon, their massed fronds a verdant explosion of life against the pink Martian sky. Everywhere he looked, Jeff saw an amazing variety of flora, unlike anything he'd ever seen on Earth. Palms, banyans, eucalyptus, citrus, bananas, and a thousand other species of vegetation grew, all flourishing in the luxuriant hothouse atmosphere of the colony.

Regrettably, he had no time to contemplate such wonders, for just ahead the sound of plasma fire wrenched his attention back into focus. Snatching Mara's hand, Jeff darted off the path and disappeared into dense undergrowth, pushing his way deeper into thick stands of bamboo.

Some minutes later, as he and Mara neared the edge of the central district, the sound of plasma fire grew more intense. With it came the hue and cry of men clashing against men—the shouted commands of Unification troops, the tattoo of combat boots dashing across plasma-scorched pavement, the hellish bursts of nova grenades, the dying screams . . .

Jeff looked down at Mara huddled beside him. No child should have to witness war, he thought. And yet, what was this girl but a refugee of war? A war, he knew, that had never really ended. A genocidal war against the last members of the white race—fought here amongst the burning towers of this far-flung paradise.

Crouched there listening to the battle, Jeff drew Mara nearer to him, comforting her as best he could. Did she know that this was the final struggle for their racial existence—that the sounds of death just ahead were the advancing shadows of extinction? He didn't know. He only knew that he loved his people in that moment, and would die here at their valiant side rather than submit to the multicultural hell of Earth ever again.

“We've got to move on,” Jeff finally said, cupping Mara's chin in his hand.

She nodded, and they continued onward towards the center of Avalon.

A short time later they entered the burning edge of the business district, and were met by utter destruction. Hundreds of dead colonists lay sprawled in the streets, cut down earlier by massed plasma beams as Unification troops swept through the central core.

“Which way?” Jeff asked.

“That way,” Mara pointed.

Jeff took her hand, and together they dashed down the body-strewn street. Up ahead lay the smoking ruins of a five story building. Nearing it a minute later, Jeff stumbled to a halt and looked up. There, inscribed across the front of the structure in metallic gold letters, he read:

NAYRA  
Never Again Yield Racial Allegiance

He felt his heart pound, once, then lowered his head. It was too late, he realized. If Karl Ramstrom had been here—as was likely—he was either captured or dead by now. If so, there was no further point in searching for him.

“What do we do now?” Mara tearfully asked.

Jeff looked down at her, trying to conceal his disappointment. “We don’t give up, scout. We just keep searching until—”

“Don’t make a move, pure-breed!”

Jeff whirled to see five Unification troopers trotting rapidly towards them. Before he could react, he and the girl were surrounded. As one of the troopers stepped forward and deftly relieved Jeff of his weapon, another seized the girl.

“Hurry,” a third trooper ordered, the one obviously in command. His left shoulder bore the black disk and silver chevrons of a Unification platoon sergeant. Standing about Jeff’s height, the sergeant’s dark face regarded his two captives for a lingering moment, as if he were already deciding their fate. Then, he snapped a command at his troopers, and they moved on down the avenue, their two captives in tow.

Ahead, a large building loomed against the blue curvature of the colony’s gigantic pressure dome, fronted by silver and gold colonnades. Even at this distance, Jeff could just make out the name on the building:

## Museum of Euro-Ethnic History

Never before had he seen such an incredible structure on Earth. There had been museums devoted to African history, of course. And Asian history. And Latin history. But none whatsoever to the history of his own people. The explanation World Gov always gave to any white foolish enough to question this fact was simple and terse: that the few achievements of a race—now all but extinct—were already “covered” in the great museums of the Africans, Asians, and Latins, and therefore needed no separate museums of their own.

And yet, no museum on Earth had ever been of the size or grandeur of the one they were now approaching, Jeff realized. What wonders of truth must lie behind its walls, he thought. What bright and glorious achievements must yet be preserved in that magnificent edifice. What dreams his people must have dreamt, down through the centuries, so that they might one day stand here amongst the mighty towers of Avalon . . .

A moment later the five Unification troopers, along with their two captives, entered a broad esplanade fronting the great museum. As they started across it, the unexpected appearance of a Unification troop carrier racing down the middle of it brought them to a sudden halt. The five troopers looked at one another in a curious way, Jeff noticed, then back at the approaching troop carrier. Though he couldn't be sure, he thought he detected a strange look of apprehension on their faces.

“Just be calm,” the sergeant whispered to his men. “Let me approach them first.”

Jeff had no time to ponder the cryptic remark, for in the next instant the troop carrier ground to a halt in front of them. A burly lieutenant with a crooked nose, Afro-Asian features, and bulging eyes leaned out the window and barked, “What unit are you soldiers from?”

“E Company Third Platoon,” the sergeant crisply replied.

“Then what the fuck are you doing in this sector? The fighting moved into South Quadrant over an hour ago.”

“We got separated from our unit during the battle in East Quadrant, Lieutenant. On our way back to our company we captured these two prisoners near the Nayra building.”

“Captured them? What in Allah's name for? You know Commissioner Yehudit's orders—take no prisoners.”

“This man is different, Lieutenant. He's wanted by Commissioner Yehudit after escaping from custody.”

The burly lieutenant eyed Jeff for a long moment. “Yeah . . . I recognize him now.”

He shifted his glance back to the sergeant. "Looks like you just made yourself a promotion, trooper."

"Just doing my duty for World Gov," the sergeant replied.

Jeff couldn't be certain, but the sergeant's tone of voice sounded almost sarcastic.

"What about the girl?"

"She was with him."

The lieutenant's glance narrowed. "I see . . . What are you going to do with her?" There was a sudden look of interest in his bulging eyes.

"I planned on taking her back to my unit."

The lieutenant glanced back at his truckload of troopers, rubbing his chin. "Well now, maybe I oughta take her off your hands right now, sergeant, and save you the trouble." His dark eyes dropped down the length of the girl. "Besides, my men are in need of some R&R, if you know what I mean . . ."

Suddenly tensing, Jeff shot a glance towards the troop carrier. At least twenty soldiers were seated within it, all with the same obscene lust in their dark eyes. If he had to, he'd grab the girl and make a run for it, suicidal though it might be. Yet, no sooner had he prepared to do so, than he noticed the sergeant's hand slipping stealthily towards a nova grenade clipped to his ammo belt.

What in Vishnu's name is going on, Jeff wondered, even as the sergeant tightened his right hand with deadly intensity on the plasma-charged hand grenade.

"I think you're absolutely right, Lieutenant," the sergeant said. "You and your men certainly deserve a little something for your troubles."

Chuckling lewdly, the lieutenant leaned out the window of his cab—his eyes still fixed on Mara—and said: "Got something special in mind, Sergeant?"

"Oh, you can bet on it, Lieutenant."

"Like what?"

"Like—this!"

In the next instant, the sergeant ripped free a nova grenade and tossed it into the back of the troop carrier.

Reacting instantly, Jeff seized Mara's arm and dashed across the esplanade, just as the lieutenant snarled in rage from somewhere behind: "Kill them!"

The high-pitched shrill of plasma rifles was followed an instant later by a burst of blue-green radiance as the nova grenade detonated. Jeff glanced back to see the troop

carrier lift off the esplanade, keel over in mid-air, then explode in a ragged ball of flame. Bodies, dismembered by the blast, went flying off in all directions, scattering bone, brains, and eviscerated flesh over a wide area. And yet—dashing out of the expanding inferno like boulders shot forth from a volcanic eruption—came the sergeant and three of his men. A fourth one, burnt down by the lieutenant's plasma gun an instant before the nova grenade detonated, lay charred on the blackened esplanade.

"Come on!" the sergeant ordered, coming to a stop in front of Jeff and the girl a moment later. "The explosion will bring more Unification troopers."

Jeff held his ground. "No deal, sergeant. This is as far as we go. I don't know why you killed those troopers or what you're up too, but you're obviously out of your mind."

The sergeant grinned. "Am I?"

Something about the grin pricked a sudden memory in Jeff. And then, the sergeant was laughing at him, laughing joyously, his head thrown back, his dark eyes lifted to the heavens.

"Karl . . ."

In answer, the sergeant reached up a hand and stripped off a black wig, exposing reddish-gray hair. Then, another hand went up to his dark eyes and when they came away again, the eyes were a brilliant green. Finally, the fine mist from a tiny aerosol can sprayed over his face revealed the fair skin of his Swedish ancestry.

"Welcome to Mars, Jeff," Karl Ramstrom greeted, no longer disguising his voice.

Jeff, frozen with astonishment, murmured: "But . . . how?"

"You mean—how did we locate you?"

"Yes . . ."

"Avalon Intelligence discovered you were a fugitive from Commissioner Yehudit shortly after the invasion began. Since AI figured you might try to find me, we went looking for you instead. And the only logical place where we figured you might turn up was the Nayra building."

Jeff nodded, then raised his eyes again. "Ahmad Yehudit has orders to wipe out this entire colony."

"I know."

"It's all over for our people, isn't it?"

Karl shook his head. "Not at all, Jeff. It's just the beginning for us."

Jeff placed a hand on Mara's shoulder, drawing her near to him. "I'd like to believe

that, Karl. For her sake.”

Karl too looked down at the girl. “Yes . . . she is our future, isn’t she? She’s the future of our Race. That’s why we must never again allow our people to be threatened with extinction.”

In the distance, the sound of plasma fire brought a forlorn look to Jeff’s eyes. “But they’ve killed so many of us . . . What hope have we now?”

“More than you may think. Come—we haven’t much time.”

Taking Mara’s hand, Jeff followed after Karl and his three remaining men. They headed in the direction of the great museum, finally reaching it a minute later. Pausing at the foot of the steps, Jeff gazed up in awe, realizing that the entire history of his Race must be contained within.

“It was all a lie, wasn’t it?” Jeff whispered. “That our Race had never amounted to much.”

Karl nodded. “It was the only way World Gov could subjugate the last of our kind, Jeff. By erasing our history and our heritage, they hoped to destroy the truth of what we once were.”

Jeff felt a hot rush of tears in his eyes, remembering again old man Parker. He had died a lonely old man, in what to him must have been an insane asylum of World Gov lies.

“God damn you all,” Jeff muttered, “God damn the world you allowed to be . . .”

And though he named no names, Karl Ramstrom knew that Jeff Huxton was speaking of every white—both living and dead—that had sold out his race to multiculturalism.

A strong hand settled upon Jeff’s shoulder. “Never again will we allow this to happen, my friend,” Karl said. “Never again will we let down our guard.”

Jeff nodded solemnly.

Then, he and Mara followed Karl Ramstrom and his men up the steps and through the welcoming entrance of the great museum.



# Twenty

*"We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."*

— T. S. Eliot

Ahmad Yehudit spun around as Colonel Lwanga entered his West Quadrant command post. For the last seven hours Unification troops had moved through the great domed colony, systematically exterminating every man, woman, and child they could find. Now, the sounds of fighting were growing fainter by the minute, as the last pockets of colonist resistance were silenced. Yet, no sign of either Karl Ramstrom or Jeff Huxton had turned up.

"Anything new to report?" Commissioner Yehudit asked, his voice sharp with impatience.

"Nothing, Commissioner. My troops just completed a second search of the colony. No trace of Karl Ramstrom or Jeff Huxton could be found."

"Then search it a third time!"

"As you wish, Commissioner." Colonel Lwanga turned to go, then suddenly hesitated. "There was one thing, however . . ."

"Out with it."

"I received a report not five minutes ago that a troop carrier was destroyed over in East Quadrant. Near the museum."

"And?"

"All but one trooper was reported killed. The lone survivor claimed a man fitting Jeff Huxton's description was seen in the company of five Unification troopers just before a nova grenade destroyed the carrier. But that doesn't seem possible since—"

Ahmad clenched his fist into a tight hammer of hate. "Those troopers were imposters, you fool! They were Avalons! And now they've got Jeff Huxton!" The Commissioner of Multiculturalism lumbered over to Colonel Lwanga and glared down at him. "Round up two platoons of your very best troops."



“Yes, Commissioner.”

“Have them surround the museum and seal off all exits—immediately!”

“This way, Jeff.”

Holding Mara’s tiny hand, Jeff Huxton followed Karl Ramstrom and his men through the massive halls of the great museum. Along the way, they passed hundreds of exhibits chronicling the entire history of their people, from their earliest beginnings amid the cold forests of Europe’s Upper Paleolithic period to their building of mankind’s first star probes. It was a magnificent panorama of achievement the likes of which no other race on Earth had ever come even close to equaling. No wonder World Gov had stopped at nothing to wipe out the truth, Jeff thought. For the truth revealed within this great museum was the most damning indictment against multiculturalism that he had ever seen.

“I hadn’t realized . . .” Jeff started to say, but fell silent again amid the overwhelming glory of his people.

“Now you understand,” Karl said, his voice solemn.

Jeff nodded, his eyes filled with quiet gratitude for all that his ancestors had accomplished, down through the dark and perilous centuries.

Clasping Jeff’s shoulder, Karl nodded in the direction ahead. “And now we must gather our people and seek a new destiny.”

“What people, Karl? The colony is all but destroyed.”

They turned right down another wing of the vast museum, and hurried along towards the far end of it.

“The colony may be,” Karl admitted, “but not all the colonists.” He gestured a hand at the floor of the museum. “A hundred meters beneath us lies an underground cavern where fifteen thousand colonists rest in suspended animation. They represent the best seed of our Race. From that seed we will build a new civilization on Alpha Centauri.”

“But there isn’t time, Karl—even if you manage to decode the Zaslov stardrive equations that I carry.”

Karl threw back his head in bemused laughter as they passed by a display case highlighting Thomas Edison’s greatest inventions. “Jeff, please forgive my seeming ungratefulness, but we Avalons have no further need of the Zaslov stardrive equations you possess. You see, less than two months after I returned to Mars my assistants and I finally cracked the secret of ion-interphase propulsion. From there, we developed and

built our own starship. And, judging by our present circumstances, none too soon it would appear . . .”

“But where is your starship?” Jeff asked, as they moved past another display case, this one displaying a replica of the world’s first airplane along with the lifelike figures of its two Euro-ethnic brothers/inventors. “As far as I know, it wasn’t detected in Mars orbit. Otherwise, Ahmad Yehudit would have ordered it destroyed or seized by now.”

Karl nodded. “True enough. And that’s precisely the reason why we decided not to build our starship in Martian orbit.”

“Then . . . where is it?”

As they continued along their way, Karl gestured again at the polished floor.

Understanding finally dawned in Jeff. “You mean it’s beneath us?”

Karl grinned. “That’s right. And in less than a minute you’ll—”

A sudden explosion just off to Karl’s right blasted a gaping hole in the museum wall, spewing chunks of concrete across their path. Mara screamed as a dozen Unification troopers burst through, their plasma weapons sweeping the dusty rubble. Whipping around, Karl and his men unleashed a scorching wave of bluish-green energy, burning down the first troopers to storm through. But more were rushing in.

“Run!” Karl commanded.

They ran.

They ran for their lives, their future, and their Race.

They ran from nineteen billion teeming brown mongrels—mongrels that would soon plummet the Earth into a new Dark Age.

“Stop them!”

Without looking back, Jeff instantly recognized the voice.

Ahmad Yehudit.

A terrible fear caught in his throat, for he knew Ahmad would never rest until every last one of them was exterminated.

Destroyed.

Extinct . . .

A low-energy, non-lethal plasma burst sizzled through the air, striking one of Karl’s men in the back. Knocked unconscious to the floor, Jeff started to go to him, until Karl’s harsh command drove them onward. “Either way he’s dead, Jeff! Trying to save him would have killed us all!”

Jeff had to agree, and yet a stab of guilt struck deep into his heart.

Another blob of low-energy plasma shot past them, bursting in blue-green radiance against a marble bust of William Shakespeare at the far end of the hall. Then, a second and third burst struck down Karl's two remaining men, sprawling them unconscious to the floor.

"They must want us alive!" Jeff gasped, as yet another low-energy plasma burst ruptured near them.

"Then keep running, my friend! We've only to make it to that elevator at the far end!"

Then, from out of a side corridor, another squad of Unification troopers suddenly rushed at them. Shoving Jeff and Mara out of harm's way, Karl whipped his plasma rifle around with lightning speed and cut half a dozen of them to blazing atoms.

But more were coming—

"Only fifty meters to go!" Karl shouted, swinging around and taking out another Unification trooper with an expertly thrown knife even as he urged Jeff and Mara onward. Then—something metallic bounced across the polished floor directly in front of them.

"Nova grenade!" Karl yelled, shoving Jeff and Mara behind a display case an instant before it detonated. The force of the explosion catapulted Ramstrom head over heels and slammed him against the floor, knocking him out. His plasma rifle, torn free of his grasp, slid uselessly out of reach. Spying it, Jeff dashed over and seized it, just in time to whirl around and rip off a long, withering blaze of death at half a dozen advancing Unification troops.

"Take cover behind that object!" Jeff commanded Mara, even as he pulled the unconscious body of Karl Ramstrom to safety. Seconds later, all three were sheltered behind the hulking shape of an early 20th century automobile, something called a "Ford Model T." Looking forlornly around him, Jeff realized he could have spent half a lifetime exploring all these wondrous creations of his people, if only circumstances had been different . . .

Yet, he had no time to regret what might have been, for they were now surrounded on three sides by heavily armed Unification troops. Their only hope of escape lay to their back—an elevator which led to a buried starship far below—and a last chance against racial extinction.

"It's all over, Jeff," a rich, sonorous voice called out from somewhere in the distance.

Clenching his fists against the hard metal shaft of the plasma rifle, Jeff peered around the side of the Model T, an errant lock of sandy hair falling over one blue eye.

Scattered here and there amid the museum's countless display cases, statuary, and artifacts, he spied several dozen Unification troopers, each positioned with their weapons aimed directly at him. And now, coming forward out of the gloom, was none other than Ahmad Yehudit.

Slow and ponderous, the Commissioner of Multiculturalism moved like a great beast towards an African watering hole, confident that all else would flee before him. As Jeff watched, he felt his trigger finger suddenly tighten, wanting in that one instant to flame him to ashes. Yet, doing so would destroy any chance of their ever reaching the elevator; for should he kill Ahmad now, the surrounding troopers would not hesitate to saturate their position with massed plasma fire.

"It's all over . . ." Ahmad repeated, more softly this time. "You're completely surrounded, Jeff. Make it easy for yourself and come out with your hands up. I'll give you five minutes."

Beside Jeff, little Mara cried softly, her tiny fists clutching at his side. The Mother of their Race, he thought. Their last and final hope. He had to save her—and every child like her sleeping far below, so that one day soon they might reach the stars and give birth to a new and glorious civilization.

But how?

Then, he heard a groan and looked over at Karl. The red-haired leader of Nayra was coming to, as the effects of the nova grenade wore off.

"Jeff . . ."

Involuntarily, Jeff reached out and touched Karl's face, as one brother to another might. For they were brothers, he realized, in a way more profound than he had ever imagined.

"Are you alright, Karl?"

Karl managed a weak smile as he pushed himself into a crouched position. "I think so . . ." Yet, unknown to either man, Ramstrom had suffered internal injuries, including two broken ribs. Only by virtue of an indomitable will was he even able to move at all. Finally, after observing their predicament with his keen green eyes, Ramstrom murmured: "Not good."

Jeff nodded, looking again at Ahmad standing in the near distance. He's enjoying this, he thought. He's standing there reveling in our end. To him, we are bison, marching towards our extinction . . .

A moment later, the quiet sound of Karl's voice brought Jeff around again. "Listen carefully to me, Jeff. In less than an hour a switch will be thrown, opening a tunnel from

below the Martian surface to the sky above. Up that tunnel the first starship from this solar system—and perhaps last—will depart for Alpha Centauri. If nothing else, I want you and little Mara to be aboard it. Do you understand?”

Jeff lowered his eyes, looking back across the long years of his life. It had not been a good life, for there had been little joy or love in it. Yet, he had no regrets, knowing now that it had led him here, to this day, to stand beside a man named Karl Ramstrom.

“Alpha Centauri will be a tough world to survive on,” Jeff finally replied, his voice coming now as if from a great distance.

“Isn’t that right?”

Karl nodded. “Very.”

“Then I’m certain they’ll need a man more like you to lead them,” Jeff said with finality, “rather than a man like me.”

Karl’s eyes momentarily deepened in color, knowing in that one instant that he was bearing witness to something far beyond ordinary courage; something he would never see or hear again for the remainder of his life. If so, he must never forget this moment; never forget that the best and bravest man he had ever known would never walk the far shores of Alpha Centauri with him. And—knowing that—he could now do Jeff Huxton no greater honor than to accept his decision without protest.

“I understand, Jeff . . .” Karl quietly replied, his simple words conveying all the dignity and respect one man could bestow upon another.

Jeff lowered his eyes, in acceptance and final gratitude. Then, as he looked down at the girl, he said: “The two of you can reach the elevator and the starship below. You’ll have only a few seconds to make your run . . . but I’ll buy you those seconds.”

Karl nodded solemnly.

Then, Jeff reached down and touched Mara gently on the shoulder. Slowly, she looked up at him. There was so much to say to her that would now never be said. For in spirit, as well as in blood, she truly was his daughter. And, in the name of that, he would do what he must. “You’ll be going with Karl from here on, Mara. He’s going to take you far away to a new and better world.”

“Aren’t you coming with us, Jeff . . . ?”

Jeff closed his eyes for a long moment, a faraway smile passing briefly over his lips. “In a way I’ll always be with you, scout. And one day, when you’re much older, you’ll come to understand that.” Then, lifting his eyes back to Karl, he said: “How many nova grenades do you have left in that satchel?”

“Four or five,” Karl replied.

Jeff held out his hand.

A moment later, wearing the satchel around his waist, Jeff called out to Ahmad Yehudit: “I want to talk, Ahmad!”

The large man nodded gravely and motioned him forward.

“Okay,” Jeff said, looking back at Karl. “You’ll know when the moment comes.” He glanced one last time at Mara. “Make the most of it.”

Karl took Mara to his side. “We will, Jeff.”

Jeff nodded. Then, slinging his plasma rifle over his shoulder, he slowly walked towards Ahmad Yehudit, who stood waiting for him in the shadowy distance. A minute later, Jeff came face to face with the Commissioner of Multiculturalism. Next to him stood a bronze statue, that of a bearded man with a noble forehead and a visage that seemed to gaze towards the future. Garbed in strange clothing, of a kind dating back at least two centuries, Jeff wondered who he had been. The name beneath the statue meant nothing, just one more historical figure lost to the past. Yet, the inscription above the name suddenly caught his eye. As Ahmad stood there glaring at him, Jeff silently read:

I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races. I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality.

Lowering his eyes once more, Jeff looked again at the name of the man whom the statue stood in honor of, and the date in which he had spoken those words:

Abraham Lincoln  
September 18, 1858

Then, slowly, he lifted his eyes back to Ahmad Yehudit. “So they knew . . . even back then.”

Ahmad sneered at Jeff’s words, a mocking glint in his obsidian eyes. “So they did. What of it? Your kind was too weak to heed the warning. For centuries you held the world in the palm of your hand . . . and yet you gave it up.” He stepped forward, looming menacingly over Jeff. “And now, this is how you end.”

“We gave up the world believing we could bring about a nobler and better

humanity.”

Ahmad laughed. “I know something of those times myself. Even World Gov has preserved the truth deep inside its archives.”

“And what is the truth, Ahmad?”

The man who was of all races and yet no race at all, replied: “It was not nobility of spirit that made your leaders turn over the world to us. It was fear, Jeff. Nothing more. Just cowardly fear.” He cast a look of contempt at the statue of Abraham Lincoln. “Your people should have listened to a man like him . . . while you still had the chance.”

“I know that now, Ahmad. I just wanted to hear you say it.”

Ahmad regarded him curiously. “Why?”

Jeff smiled, as if he were coming to the end of a long and difficult journey. “Because we’ve stopped being afraid; because, from this day forward, we’ll never again fear those who despise our kind, or allow them to live among us.”

Ahmad’s face grew cold with malice. “It’s a little too late for that, isn’t it? Your kind is already dead.” He took a step towards Jeff. “You just haven’t been buried yet.”

Jeff reached down into the satchel and withdrew a nova grenade. As he did, he saw the expression on Ahmad’s face suddenly change from smugness to fear, in that final moment between them. “World Gov is going to die, Ahmad. That much we both know. And somehow . . . I think it’s fitting that you’re the first one to go.”

Two brown hands lunged out in rage.

In that same instant, with his head thrown back against the stars, Jeff detonated the satchel of nova grenades in a blinding flash of triumph.

And was free.

Twelve years later, Karl Ramstrom stood upon a yellow beach beside a shallow green sea, remembering that last moment. He was older now, but the years had been good to him. The colony had grown and prospered since their arrival at New Europe Bay. Even now, the farms were spreading inland, and the first generation of Centaurans was already growing strong and sturdy in the light of another sun.

Seven years earlier they had overcome a deadly attack of thorn beasts, and then a terrifying plague the year after. Now, they were fifty thousand strong, and the promise of their new world looked bright indeed.

Karl turned, scanning the horizon.

Yes, much had been accomplished . . .

Just a year ago, their unmanned star probe had sent back chilling images from Earth, leaving no doubt as to the fate of their former world. Mass famine had swept the planet, the Unification had collapsed, and World Gov's leaders, butchered by starving hordes, had been toppled—leaving in its wake a savage barbarism that had swept the last traces of civilization from the globe. Earth would not recover for centuries, Karl knew—if ever.

So it was that he found himself reflecting upon these things, standing there along that alien shore. Much had been lost, and yet so much had been regained. His people were free again, to pursue their own heritage, history, and way of life. Never again would there be racial conflict, or the racial guilt that had almost destroyed them.

His only regret was Jeff Huxton.

He had suffered so much, and then given his life so that a man, a young girl, and a dying race might yet live. It was hard to reconcile that in the scheme of things, Karl thought. But then, life was so often ruthless in such ways. One could only live and do what one thought best, and no more. And in the end, Jeff Huxton had done just that.





# About the Author

Ward Kendall is a novelist living in California. He is the father of two teenage daughters. *Hold Back This Day*, his first novel, was originally published in 2001, and a Swedish translation appeared in 2004. His second novel, *The Towers of Eden*, was published in 2002.